

“The Earth Speaks” (part I)

Rev. Ross Varney, April 26, 2020

I’m getting a bit tired of worrying about germs (one virus in particular), tired of worrying about how to shop, whether to wear gloves, use lysol on everything, or wash my hands until raw!

Well, it’s Springtime, and the Earth is speaking loudly: “come outdoors, witness all the new life and new birth; start something new! Jesus said it clearly: look at the birds and the flowers, learn from them! And his point was not to worry so much; the birds find food, the flowers are clothed in beauty without worrying. The Creator cares for them, so surely must care for you! Jesus was always using nature to teach lessons. OK, a little less worry, and a little more praise and reverence for nature!

The Hebrew Scriptures also used nature to teach lessons. Job gets upset with his so-called friends theologizing about his sickness, and says to them: “*Even the birds and the animals have much they could teach you! Ask the creatures of the earth and sea for their wisdom! ... your ears just enjoy hearing words!*” (Job 12: 7-11) And in Psalm 19 the Bible speaks of the Heavens “proclaiming” the glory of God, and the earth proclaiming God’s handiwork. One of the choir’s favorite songs is from Psalm 19: “The Heavens Proclaim!” ... *From morning dawn to setting sun...the heavens proclaim God’s glory! No word is heard, yet voices sing through all the earth!*” Who doesn’t like to gaze at a sunset or sunrise? Such beautiful colors grace our world! And early dawn is a wonderful time to listen to bird calls! In early Spring before the leaves are on the trees, you can even see which bird is singing that lovely song! We really do need a break from the news, we need fresh spring air and sunshine, some time communing with God out in nature.

A long time ago, a family was celebrating the baptism a baby, and the father kindly “informed me” that he would not be attending Sunday worship much, that he would usually be out in his boat, on the

river, out in nature; that was his “God.” Others may say they commune with God on mountain trails, rail trails, biking trails. Who can argue with that? As we see from Psalm 19 and Jesus own teaching methods, a good place to start thinking about God is in Nature!

Psalm 8 has another great saying: *“When I look at the sky and the moon and the stars, what are human beings or mere mortals that you care for them?”* Like Job and the psalm writers, we are humbled before the the glory, beauty, and mystery of creation, and know we have so much to learn!

Although the “voice” of God can go throughout all the earth without words, and are ultimately inadequate to describe the Divine Spirit, words can of course help, and we need a better vocabulary for our relationship with the Sacred in Nature. The words of our opening hymn are attributed to St. Francis of Assisi who was known for his love of nature. He was depicted and sculpted with birds lighting on him. Hear the words of the hymn again: *“Thou burning sun, Thou silver moon, Thou rushing wind, Thou flowing water!”* Unfortunately, we too easily objectify and dismiss our earth, we think of our world as an “it” and we do not listen closely to the voice of the winds, rivers, or trees, that are very much “alive.” Pope Francis, who took his name from nature-loving St. Francis, says to us: *“Our planet is a homeland and ...humanity is one people living in a common home....Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each creature, and the love which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”*

Joyce Rupp, of the Servants of Mary, is a contemporary spiritual writer and retreat leader. In her book called *Boundless Compassion*, she addressed the issue of compassion for all creation. She recalls watching a mother chipmunk teaching her baby to climb up a concrete wall: *“The mother scampered up to the top of the wall, chattering support to the child...The young one tried, but could only make it*

partway. She called from the top, saying something like: C'mon, C'mon, I know you can do it." A pattern of teaching and coaxing, of going down and trying to help up. It went on for the ten minutes.... I became captivated by the mother's patience, thinking of the similarity between humans and creatures... The scene could have been one of a parent teaching a child to ride a bike.... I felt a relationship with them. The longer I stood there, the more deeply absorbed I became in their situation. I felt less an observer and more a cheerleader. I wanted that little chipmunk to make it to the top! “ We all have memories of watching a mother with young, and share this common experience with all of God's creation. We are fully interconnected and interdependent with creation. We are in continual communion or relationship with the entire earth.

One of our church elders recommended to us the works of E.O. Wilson, a scientist, naturalist, who expresses his awe and reverence for nature in his research. He wrote several books on ants, and is considered the world's leading authority on ants! He is quite philosophical also, as two of his other books are: “On Human Nature,” and “The Unity of Knowledge”. One day I picked up a children's book on Ants! And yes, they are incredible, unbelievable! ... they have an incredibly ordered society underground, under those anthills, with certain rooms for ants with particular duties..... sort of like what we have learned about bees: there are workers, guards, the queen, and so forth. We learn so much from nature. And the awe or reverence that often comes with passionate research may very well be called a spiritual experience, a “communion” with a Creator God.

A passionate naturalist in Germany, Peter Wohlleben, is an expert on Trees! After walking through some mangrove trees in Florida, I found his book in the gift shop called “The Hidden Life of Trees: What they feel and how they communicate.” Even in the children's version, I learned so much! Did you know that when a giraffe eats the leaves off a certain tree, it somehow sends danger signals to neighboring

trees, who then excrete a liquid on their leaves that repels the giraffes! Apparently the root systems of many trees are so intertwined and interconnected that much of the “communication” goes on underground! Am I being clear? The earth is so fully alive that we would do well to ponder how we “relate” to “it,” not just as an objective “it,” but as a living being, as do St. Francis and our Native American neighbors. Many who care for our earth as a living being have made the comparison that the rain forest and its trees are like the lungs of our planet, and the rivers are like arteries or veins.

I would be remiss if I did not say something at this point about our “dislike” for some of God’s creatures! How about carpenter ants, Mr. E.O.Wilson?! Yes, they may be amazing, and have amazing tunnels and homes, but I don’t want them in my house, nor eating away the foundation! Or how about carpenter bees?! They seem to swarm around porch overhangings, at the roofline, like at the parsonage. They make people very nervous! Even with spray and chemicals, they come back every year, boring tunnels throughout various beams! Needless to say, there are many of God’s creatures that we would rather do without... from mosquitoes to rats to poisonous snakes or coyotes, all amazing creatures, but not in my back yard please!

So there you have it; the good the bad and the ugly in God’s creation. Yet somehow, it all “belongs,” as one church elder often says. We observe, and we learn. There is a cycle of life and death, and yes, “survival of the fittest” in Nature. These days, we are learning that a virus, like a cancer, is doing what it was born to do: trying to multiply, to replicate itself. And we humans are doing our best to avoid it and kill it where possible. We have also learned a lesson that human beings are vitally interconnected, that we can help and support one another as one human family, or fight with each other and those who are “other” to our own peril.

Next week I will continue to look at how Nature speaks, reflecting on the wounds in Nature, the ways we contribute to those wounds

..... and what we can do, and are called to do, to care for creation, to be “stewards” of our Earth home. I will use some of Rev. Jim Antal’s writings. He was the president of the Massachusetts UCC for many years, and is now a national spokesman about Climate Change in the United Church of Christ. But for now, I think it is enough to focus on the positive, to heed the call of Spring, the call of the birds and flowers, to observe Nature with awe and reverence, and praise. The Springtime earth and skies surely “proclaim the Glory of God!”

I’ll close by singing a choir favorite: a song by Mark Unbehagen that celebrates creation. It is called “God of Inspiration.” Let’s join this composer in the spirit of awe and reverence, for the God of Creation:

*1. To the One who paints the colors into the sunsets of the sky,
To the One who shapes the plants and creatures, infinite of design.
For the beauty and the mystery, of the sparrow, the oak, the rose,
For the ever-changing tapestry, that feeds the eye and soul,*

*CHORUS: We praise You, O God of Inspiration, We praise you,
For breathing life through creation. O we praise You, praise You,
We praise You God... for the canvas of our lives.*

*2. To the One who stirs the rhythms into the universe of time,
To the One who calls forth songs of life, joining heart, soul and mind.
For the perfect imperfection, of creation resounding your word,
For Your never-ending symphony, Your longing to be heard, CHORUS*

*3. To the One who carves each one of us, with a beauty all our own,
To the One who weaves the web of life, that we need not feel alone.
For creating recreation: time to rest, to play, to be...
For surrounding us with wonders, and beauty all can see, CHORUS*