

All Nature Sings: Planet Earth

*A sermon preached on Psalm 148 on Sunday, May 26, 2024,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*
I.

Over these weeks with the Psalms, we have been encouraged in our living by the psalmists' words of creation and thanksgiving, of intimacy and care, of praise above all else. That praise is precisely where we'll reside today in these words of Psalm 148.

Did you hear that chorus of praise to the Lord? It arises from every corner of creation: sea monsters, all deeps, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things, flying birds, kings, all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men, and women, old and young. Which is to say that all creation pulses with praise to God. Our celebration of God's character and nature and presence and providence in this world is but one human voice alongside the many. The voices of the birds chirping to one another this morning? Praise to God. The rains that drench the earth? Praise to God. This "geography of praise" in the poetry of the psalmist contains it all, from the heavens to the earth, the depth and length and height and breadth of God's creation in a chorus of praise.

And the way the psalmist sees it, that we can and should praise God does not require us to be anything other than precisely how we are created. God's first act was that of creation, and all things were created with God's *hesed*, God's steadfast love, the first covenant of relationship between God and the whole of the created world. The fruit trees praise God just like the creeping things do. The snow praises God by falling cold and crisp, just as the stars praise God by shining. The sea monsters? Well I'm not exactly sure, but

they're praising God somehow! The human – man and woman, young and old, and all the beautiful diversity betwixt and between – praises God with their very lives. As one writer says, “Everything best serves God simply by being what it was created to be.”¹

Theologian Ellen Davis reminds us that “praise is more than something we do for God... the truth is that praise does more for us than it does for God... for praising God is not concocted flattery, but the most earnest human business we can undertake. Ultimately, it is for the sake of the world: we praise God in order to see the world as God does.”² Or, as Frederick Buechner says, “We learn to praise God not by paying compliments but by paying attention.”³

We all know there are times that praise feels unreachable, that expressing our joy and admiration of God just catches in our throat because sorrow has taken up residence instead. It's almost as if we've swallowed too much grief or sorrow or loneliness to utter a sound. Sometimes praise is no more than a whisper.⁴ In those moments, the psalmist reminds us, we can take heart because we don't praise alone. Our voices join with birdsong and barks, thunder and crashing waves to echo praise to the Creator.

II.

In each of these weeks talking through the singing nature around us, we've explored an ethical response to these various elements of creation. The skies invite our humility and wonder. The land calls forth our respect and

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-psalm-148-21>

² Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, p34.

³ Frederick Buechner, “Praise,” *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*.

⁴ Kimberly Clayton, “Psalm 148,” *Feasting on the Word Commentary Series: Year B, Volume 1*, p156.

hope. The waters summon us to shalom and generosity. Humanity teaches us to live with vulnerability and particularity. And as we conclude today, considering the fullness of Mother Earth within the praise of Creator God, might we consider that the earth asks for our living and our loving.

First, our **living** – meaning, how we live fully in this world just as we are. Let me illustrate this with a story. In the hills overlooking Oakland, California, there stands a tree that time and neighborly affection has nicknamed the “Grandfather” or “Old Survivor.” Old Survivor is the only old-growth redwood still standing, weathering more than 500 years of life and industrialization, particularly following the logging of all the other ancient redwoods during the Gold Rush. Old Survivor has what you might call a cult following among local naturalists and hikers and lovers of local history, in part because of its location. You see, Old Survivor is rather hard to find. It sits on a steep rocky slope, which also makes it hard to reach. And at 93 feet with a twisted up trunk, it’s hard to use for timber. Meaning: Old Survivor became Old Survivor because it appeared to be largely useless to loggers.

In her book, *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell calls the story of Old Survivor a real-life version of the story from fourth-century Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou called “The Useless Tree.” The story tells of another gnarled, overlooked tree deemed worthless for timber by the carpenters who pass by. One carpenter in particular has a dream that night about the tree, in which the tree asks “are you comparing me with the other useful trees that bear fruit and timber? Those are ravaged daily. But my uselessness – this is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?”⁵

⁵ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, p xv - pxvii.

Odell tells this story to make a point about “resistance in place,” maintaining the fullness of one’s identity even if the productivity-driven world around us deems us “useless.” Indeed, from these particular trees we catch a glimpse of how to live particularly. Live authentically. Live just as who God created us to be, for indeed, that is enough. This is but one way to offer our praise to God – not by our striving or our efforting, not from our vain attempts to look younger, our labor to be stronger, our determination to be successful by every measure of this world. As the Psalmist reminds us, all praise to God flows from every corner, every creature, every created thing in their uniqueness. We honor God by living the fullness of our lives, permeated with praise.

Second, our **loving**. Love, as one defines it, is “the disposition to care for the other whom one has come to know.”⁶ Or in the words of Dr. King, “love is the most durable power in the world.”⁷ Or in the embodiment of love that is Jesus, whose greatest commandment is to love boldly, compassionately, indiscriminately, sacrificially. That love is for God and for neighbors, and I can’t help but to assume that our neighbors aren’t just other human neighbors. Rather, that love of neighbor extends where we are neighboring: to love of earth and all the creatures and created world therein. We are to be earth-keepers: not to own or dominate, but to tend and keep and create home, and love above all else. By loving the earth and desiring its flourishing, we are loving God, because we’re loving what and who God loves too.

Let me tell you another story. And if you will, allow me please just a moment of personal reflection here to illustrate this truth. This week, my

⁶ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, p147.

⁷ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*, p91.

mom retired from pastoral ministry and turned 70. It's been a big week, to say the least! And despite her protestations, we invited beloved friends to town and threw her a party and celebrated the good, good gift that Jane Shannon Hull is to the world.

As part of our gift to her, we reached out to scores of folks who have loved my mom over the years – and who my mom has loved with her whole heart – asking them to write a brief letter to Jane in celebration of this season of retirement and a new decade of life. (To which one of my mom's former church members, an old crusty and brilliant farmer named Earl, wrote back: "they ain't no brief words about Jane.") Over these past few weeks, letters have poured in from every corner of my mom's life: high school friends reminiscing about a choir trip to Romania, college roommates detailing old fun, soul friends from seminary remembering when my parents fell in love and discovered their calling, friends from every church my parents have served in ministry – urban, rural, and small towns all over the Southeast. The love for Jane is overflowing.

But first among all I have read in these beautiful letters is the clear truth that my mother has mothered an endless stream of people in her life. Like Mother Earth herself, Jane has created gift and grace, home and place. Nurturing former youth who she once served as Youth Minister and having seemingly-endless patience for their seemingly-endless shenanigans. Caring for churches who felt forgotten and their beloved people. Finding a need in each church and filling it naturally, seamlessly, unconditionally with her adaptive gifts and good cheer. Pastoring her seminary classmates as they pursued their Master of Divinity degree together. Praying with parents seeking adoption. Weeping with families who'd lost a beloved member.

Marrying young lovers and blessing them for a life together. Laying hands on men and women, particularly women, who have heard God's clarion call to ministry despite all the odds. Being the heart of every community who has received the gift and grace of her presence. Why? "We love," she reminds us, "because God first loved us."

In her memoir called *Braiding Sweetgrass*, author Robin Wall Kimmerer said that "being a good mother doesn't end with creating a home where just my children can flourish. A good mother grows into a richly eutrophic old woman, knowing that her work doesn't end until she creates a home where all of life's beings can flourish."⁸ Jane didn't have to retire and reach 70 to become the richly eutrophic mother she is, because her life's work has been to create home after home after home where all in her care can flourish. Living and loving and praising God at its very, very best.

III.

How then shall we offer our praise to God by living in and loving God's beloved world? How are we to be earth-keepers, and practitioners of *biophilia*, or the love (*philia*) of living things (*bios*)?⁹

Here are some suggestions.

Do one thing every day that extends care to the earth. Bonus points if it involves you being fully you. Extra credit if it involves, as we've talked about, hands in dirt, bare feet on the ground, face turned toward the sun or the rain or the clouds, all your senses alive with creation. Mother your piece of this world with deep nurture and abiding care. As you're doing those things, maybe accompany it with a word of gratitude to God! Ellen Davis says that

⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, p94.

⁹ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character*, p81.

“saying [prayers of thanksgiving and praise] is like seeing our world and our own life as a crystal, holding it up and letting light fall on its different facets. They remind us that nothing, nothing at all may be taken for granted. Everything we see and use and are is an expression of God’s creative concern, and therefore an occasion for us to say, ‘thanks.’”¹⁰

Along the way in your earth-keeping and your living and loving, refuse to fold inward in despair when the world groans. Again from Robin Wall Kimmerer who speaks to the tendency to lament all the way into paralysis when faced with the destruction of the earth’s gifts – “Restoration is a powerful antidote for despair,” she says. “We have enjoyed the feast generously laid out for us by Mother Earth, but now the plates are empty and the dining room is a mess. It’s time we started doing the dishes in Mother Earth’s kitchen. Doing dishes has gotten a bad rap, but everyone who migrates to the kitchen after a meal knows that that’s where the laughter happens, the good conversations, the friendships. Doing dishes, like doing restoration, forms relationships.”¹¹

IV.

Friends, as all nature sings around us, go and be the people who are joining all creation by praising God in your living and your loving. *All creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and with us sing! Alleluia! Amen!*

¹⁰ Ibid., p40.

¹¹ Kimmerer, p319.