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A Creation Spirituality: Coming Home

Psalm 8 *O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Gen 1:1-2:4a *God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

Please listen to the opening words of an important book by Father Thomas Berry, entitled The Dream of the Earth:
We are returning to our native place after a long absence, meeting once again with our kin in the earth community. For too long we have been away somewhere, entranced with our industrial world of wires and wheels, concrete and steel, and our unending highways, where we race back and forth in continual frenzy.

Berry is talking about our homecoming, our waking up from the nightmare of living ON the earth as though we did not belong to it. We have been focused on ourselves as human beings, with the world of nature serving only as an object for our human pursuits, regardless of the cost. Now that world is threatened by our destructiveness, we have the opportunity not only to wake up in time to save it and ourselves but also to recover a depth and breadth of the human spirit we have lost for many thousands of years.

Berry, along with others, is pointing us toward a spirituality that embraces our relationship with the earth, indeed the whole cosmos. The ecological crisis that has been growing has, in one sense, prompted this spiritual movement. Also science itself is showing us that everything in the universe is related to everything else, including us, that the earth is a living organism and not an inanimate object, and that all of life is in a constant flow and flux, from death to life.

This “new spirituality” is not really new. It is as old as the most ancient people of the earth, the indigenous people of every continent. Its hallmark is the intuition that we are related to the whole earth and universe. This is a spirituality filled with awe, joy, and a profound sense of responsibility for living upon the earth in caring and fruitful ways. The rediscovery of this kind of spirituality is, we must hope, just in time.

Christianity has contributed significantly to our long exile. It has focused too exclusively on the individual’s relationship with God. Even the dimension of community, our relationships with one another, has not fulfilled all we need to discover and embrace about our spiritual nature. Loving God and loving others in community must be completed by loving the earth, the cosmos itself, affirming our place in it as God’s creation of which we are integrally a part.

Up to this point, western Christianity has uncritically adopted western intellectual viewpoints and prejudices. What matters most is the individual human being and human history. The world of nature is only a backdrop for the main show—humanity and its so-called progress. As is our pattern as a human family, it takes a crisis, if not a complete disaster, to wake

us up to reality. The ecological crisis is forcing us out of self-centeredness and into something larger and more life giving. We are killing the earth and we not only must reverse our lifestyles, our national policies, and our social appetites in order to avert destruction, but we also have to mature in our spiritual thinking and understanding. It is not enough just to become environmental advocates, though we must do that. We have to learn in our time what ancient peoples always have known—we are spiritually intertwined with the natural world around us. We ARE that world. It is not something separate from us. Our bodies, our minds, AND our spirits are formed and sustained by the creation of which we are part. To become spiritually mature, we need to awaken to our home, which has been right here all the time, where God has made and placed us.

We need to read the scripture story in a fresh way. The scripture story is not the story of how human beings, good in the beginning, became bad and had to be rescued out of a doomed world into an otherworldly heaven. The scripture story tells of human beings as part of the good world God made and continues to love. It tells of our faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God’s trusting us to be stewards of what God created. The creation is not just a backdrop in the Bible to the human drama. It is the whole story, the underlying main theme. Yet because the creation itself is not a problem, the focus IS on the human creature who IS a problem within creation. And so we read of a God who continually calls us to live justly, in peace and responsible stewardship within our human society and in relation to the rest of creation.

Psalm 8 is one of many psalms that speak of the creation. The creation gives praise to God, reveals God’s majesty. One of the most common spiritual experiences is a profound sense of God’s reality and presence when we are out in nature. When I have talked with people about their spiritual lives, they speak of this kind of experience more often than what they have experienced in the church itself. Instead of getting defensive about it, we, the church, need to take this experience of the sacred in nature very seriously and affirm it in ourselves and others. God’s living Word is opened up to us in the printed word of scripture and the spoken word of teaching and sermon. But God’s Word is also spoken to us out there. When I arrived at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse for my retreat in March, Peg Jacobs, a U.C.C. minister now living at that community, handed me a copy of Elaine Prevallet’s new book that we will be using in our School for Christian Living in the fall at the Festival Center. “Great,” I said excitedly. “Now I have something to read!” Peg shook her head and pointed out the window to the trees, pond, and fields beyond. “THERE’S your book!” she said. I didn’t need to stick my nose in a book; I needed to stick my soul in the book of the creation, reconnect and renew my sense of being at home, being who and where God made me to be.

The psalm tells us that the awareness of our place in the creation is integral to who we are as human beings. It is built into us. Awareness of the cosmos humbles us, “puts us in our place,” as it were: When I look into the deep mystery of the galaxies and space, what are we human beings that you, God, should pay any attention to us? Everything is not about us human

beings and our history! Our spiritual work is to find out how to live humbly and harmoniously within that greater reality.

The psalm goes on. As small and insignificant as we are within the whole cosmos, God DOES pay attention to us. God DOES care for each and every one of us. And God trusts us with a crucial work to do on behalf of the creation. It is the dominion entrusted to human beings in the creation story of Genesis 1. It does not mean domination, as it has been taken to mean in recent, so-called “modern” times. Dominion means having responsibility for the care, nurture, and protection of the earth, seeing to it that all share its benefits. Dominion is kin to the word “stewardship,” another important biblical word. Stewardship means being entrusted with the care, keeping and benevolent management of what does not belong to us.

So a creation spirituality is marked by:

*Awe and wonder at our life as part of creation, a sense of the sacred all around us;

*Joy and thanksgiving in response to the growing knowledge of how wondrously our lives are touched, blessed, and nourished by all of life around us

*A deep and clear understanding of the interrelatedness and interdependence that is the very nature of life

*And the work of dominion as those trusted by God, the very Creator of life, with the fair, equitable, and sustainable care of the earth.

There is serious and exciting work for us to do both inwardly and outwardly in order to embrace this wider and deeper spirituality. What is at stake is the very survival of the earth and ourselves as part of it. At no other time in human history has there been the capacity and it seems the will to irreversibly disrupt and destroy the life of the earth. Everything that we can do in our own personal lifestyles will contribute. Action at the political level, but also the changes we make in the ways we live. The choices we make about what we buy, consume, and use make a difference. It seems that we are on a strange, even suicidal binge these days in our society. There is this obsession with consuming as much as we can. A most obvious example is that we are making and buying bigger and bigger automobiles that consume and pollute to even greater levels and are completely beyond any normal usefulness. Living more simply and consuming less—whatever we can do to live this way ourselves and encourage others to do the same will help.

But deeper than that is the change that needs to take place in our spiritual awareness. I don't think political action alone or just changing our lifestyles is going to do the job over the long haul without a deep change in consciousness, in awareness. And that is what Father Berry is talking about: We need to come home from our exile, home to the creation and our place in it.

As Christians this means seeing Christ in a new way, to see him as the Letter to the Colossians puts it as the center of a new creation (Col. 1:15-20). As we live in him, we find our true life as human beings created in God's image. We find our true relationship to the rest of creation as not only the source of our physical sustenance but also the source of joy and of wisdom.

We need to see deeply into why Jesus so often pointed to the earth, the creation in his teachings: Look at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field.... As we come home to this wider and deeper envelope of our lives, we find a healing in our souls. It is the end of the long loneliness and estrangement that has come by our obsession with only the human and our disconnection from the splendor, intricacy, and sacredness of life around us. We become aware again of our belonging, of the wonder of our lives within the whole web of life that is the earth and the whole universe.

The redemption of human life must be seen not as saving us out of this world but saving us, healing us in our relationship to the world God has created. The exclusive interpretation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as atonement for sin is in need of adjustment. In Christ we know what it means to be a true human being living within creation as we are meant to live. We see Christ as the exemplary human being who lived, taught, and died for the sake of this authentic way of human living. His death and resurrection will be seen not as the bloody sacrifice demanded by God, but the sacrificial life of one who lived in complete harmony with our true human nature and whose death at the hands of the powers of destruction was transformed by the God who is able to make all things new.

I close with some words from the new book by Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, and spiritual leader through the resistance to and overcoming of apartheid. During one of the bleakest and most hopeless times in that struggle, Bishop Tutu was at a meeting at a theological college that had been closed by the government. He took a break from the discussions and went to the garden of the college for some quiet. There he contemplated the large wooden cross that stood in the garden and what it said about their situation, which seemed so hopeless. “It was a stark symbol of Christian faith,” he writes. “It was winter: the grass was pale and dry and nobody would have believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again. It would be transfigured. As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration—of God's transformation—in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection. The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is ‘untransfigurable,’ that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory.” (God Has a Dream, p. 3)

For us as Christians, Christ is the way we come home, home to our true selves, home to the world as God's good creation, home to the universe that proclaims to us the God who is constantly making all things, including us, new.