

April 28, 2013 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

The Song of Creation

Psalm 148 *Let them praise the name of the Lord, for God commanded and they were created.*

Acts 11:1-18 *“The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.”*

Revelation 21:1-6 *“God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples and God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”*

John 13:31-35 *“I give you a new commandment, that you love another.”*

I would like to follow a thread or theme that runs through our scripture readings for today.

It begins with Psalm 148, one of many psalms that speak vividly of God's glory and presence in and through the creation, the universe. We are finally, in the last few decades, beginning to see and hear in our scriptures this message of God who is everywhere and in everything around us, and in us because, of course, we are part of nature, the creation.

We are waking up from a nightmare--the illusion of our separateness as human beings from the rest of the created world. This is mostly the product of our Western mindset, which has told us that human beings are distinct from, superior to, and even over against nature. This false perception has led to the destruction of nature, which is seen as an “object” to be exploited and conquered. The dominating illusion has been that the natural world, the creation, is simply the backdrop for what is most important—human history and culture. Thus we have perpetrated the near-annihilation of the world in which we live, and we have lost a spiritual connection that has left us sick, lonely, and bereft of joy.

Psalm 148 has the overtone of the song of creation. We must regain our created ability to hear the song once again. We are learning what other cultures more ancient and wiser than ours have always known, that we are part of that song of creation. It tells us of the sacred source and energy of the life of the world and our own lives. Contemporary science has been telling us that

the deeper we go into what makes the universe work, the more our attitude becomes one of awe in the face of mystery. We can now speak of God as the presence of the energy of life itself everywhere and in everything. This is how we hear this psalm today, the whole of the creation and universe expressing the glory of God, the source of life.

The spiritual life, then, must now include our openness to and awareness of this song of creation and of our part in it. We cannot speak of us AND nature, or the creation. For we ARE the creation. Our lives—physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally, economically, and spiritually—are woven into the fabric of the universe itself. The psalm invites us back into harmony with the song of creation and the astounding diversity and beauty of the beings and voices, all singing praise to God. The quote from Sallie McFague that is in the bulletin today says it beautifully: “Creation is a panoply of mind-boggling diversity, a myriad of outrageously extravagant species and individuals who all together make up the body of God [which is the image McFague uses to speak of the earth and universe]...Each creature praises God by simply being itself, by being fully alive.” Our healing as persons, communities, institutions, and peoples will not be full until we awaken to, take seriously, and deepen our connectedness to and place in this song of creation.

The thread continues into our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter is reprimanded for fraternizing with Gentile outsiders. You know, those who are “different” from us, who are strange or bad, odd or not our kind, those who we have judged and measured in some way, distancing ourselves from them. So Peter takes his accusers through it “step by step”. The story itself was narrated in the previous chapter. Peter had a dream in one city. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, had a dream in another. God was working in the depths to bring about something new. There is always something more happening that we are aware of. Peter dreamed of a big sheet being let down from heaven, full of animals of all kinds. Some unclean under Jewish law, others not, they are all mixed in together. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat. Peter, a devout Jew, says he cannot eat animals that are unclean. The voice tells Peter that nothing God has made is unclean.

This brings Peter insight and understanding. He sees that he must go to Roman Gentile uncircumcised person who is about as unclean as you can get, from the perspective of Peter's religious culture. Peter tells the council in Jerusalem that it was the Spirit of God that told him to go and to “not make a distinction between them and us.”

A sheet full of all God's creatures, and a heavenly voice saying that nothing in God's creation is unclean. Everything has its place and purpose. And what is finally dawning on us is that

everything is interrelated in this web and balance of life we call the earth and the universe. When we say, this is bad or this is good, when we call stormy winds(Ps. 148) bad but warm spring days good, we are making distinctions. We are dividing up reality. The problem is in us and the perceptions we cling to, not in the creation. In this story the thread continues into what the song of creation means for our relationships as human beings. Peter went to see Cornelius because God was creating a situation in which Peter could overcome the distinctions that were in his mind, so that he could learn that all human beings are holy and God wants them all to awaken to that awareness. That is the meaning of repentance. It is coming to our senses, waking up to who we really are, to the sacredness of our own life in relation to God and the rest of creation. That's what Jesus was about, what he embodied, and taught. And it got him killed by those who wanted to keep up the distinctions, the walls, who wanted to continue calling some people good and others bad, some people righteous and others sinners, who wanted to maintain the status quo, protect their power, their ego-centeredness, their wealth, their control over others. Those who cannot or refuse to hear the song of creation continue to cause themselves and others suffering.

The spiritual life, the true practice of religion, is not about distinctions and separations—my religion is better than yours, we are saved and you are not. It is about overcoming and seeing beyond distinctions, for that is how the Spirit of God works. Always toward diversity and community. Life IS diversity, throughout the creation, including the human part. Life is also about community, cooperation, mutuality, interconnectedness. And wherever we continue to make judgments and distinctions “between them and us”, we are living counter to the nature and flow of life itself.

Recently a woman in Ohio was fired from her job as a teacher. The name of her female life partner was included in her mother's obituary. Someone read it, reported it, and now children are without their teacher. Isn't that great! A triumph for morality and religion! It is what happens when we refuse to accept that life IS diversity, that reality is not divided. It is what happens when we call some unclean and others clean. Rise, Peter, kill and eat. Do not call anything that God has made unclean.

The thread continues into the reading from John's gospel. Jesus is about to leave his disciples. Judas, who will turn Jesus in to the authorities, has left the room. Jesus' way has apparently become too much for him. Jesus then gives his disciples, and us, his most important teaching, a new commandment in the sense that Jesus is making the life of love our work and our identity. Love each other as I have loved you. This is how people will know you are my followers.

Not your religious beliefs or practices. Not your social credentials, your accomplishments, or any other thing by which everyone measures the worth of someone's life. Only by the life of love.

The life of love is our part in the song of creation. It is how the sacred, everywhere-presence and energy of life, which we call God, is expressed in human beings. Jesus' divinity is not some "essence" that he had which we do not have. Nowhere in scripture is it said that Jesus was God incarnate, which would certainly make him different from us. John's gospel says that Jesus was the embodiment of the word, and that word was and is love and the life of love—love of God, love of others, love of ourselves as God's beloved children, and love of this, God's world.

We have only one commandment to work on! Our main work on this earth is to always be learning and growing into what it means to love. What it means to love in each situation, with each particular person. The expressing of love through the callings and gifts that are given to each of us. We need to talk and search together at all times about what this love is and how it acts. It is certainly a non-judgmental, no distinction-making love. That is what Peter learned, and how he joined in the song of creation. So we work with our own tendencies to divide and separate, getting insight into the things in us that keep us in the illusion of "them and us". This, and every other dimension of the life of love, is the work of our inward journey, which in turn keeps our outward journey moving in the direction of joining more and more the song of creation, the life of love. It is a matter of always growing, learning, and deepening in love and our understanding of love. And we must do it in community with one another.

There is so much to talk about when it comes to the love Jesus commands us to have and to show in our lives! Yet what I wanted to share with you today is that thread, that song that runs throughout all creation and in our own lives. It is the song of God. And it sounds nowhere more beautiful than in those words that come toward the close of the Revelation to John. The voice from heaven announces that God's home is with us. God dwells with us and we are God's people. God's very essence is with us. And God, life itself, is moving toward the comforting of all sorrow and the end of suffering. All who strive and thirst for true life will be given the gift of water from the very spring of life. It will come to us from without as we open to the song of creation all around us. It will come from within as we find in ourselves the very source of life.