

SUSTAINABLE SEPTEMBER

2019



Anglican
EcoCare



Season of Creation 2019 Prayer

Creator of Life,

The Earth is full of Your creatures, and by Your wisdom you made them all. At Your word, the Earth brought forth plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit, the waters teemed with swarms of living creatures of every kind, and world was filled with every kind of winged bird, walking animal, and creatures that creep upon the ground.

Mountains, plains, rocks, and rivers shelter diverse communities, and through the changing seasons Your Spirit renews cycles of life.

During this Season of Creation, open our eyes to see the precious diversity that is all around us. Enlighten our minds to appreciate the delicate balance maintained by each creature.

Inspire us to conserve the precious habitats that nurture this web of life.

In the name of the One who came to proclaim good news to all creation,
Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Week 1, September 1

Ocean Sunday

Week 2, September 8

Fauna and Flora Sunday

Week 3, September 15

Storm Sunday

Week 4, September 22

Cosmos Sunday

Week 5, September 29

Blessings of Animals





WELCOME FROM THE REVEREND PATRICK KING

In July I stood on a beach, on what marks the northernmost part of the Diocese of Perth. I faced into the tradewinds, peering out into the vast expanse of ocean; no landfall for a thousand kilometres, a pristine atoll in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Or almost pristine. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, forming part of the Australian Indian Ocean Territories, are down-wind and down-current from Indonesia. The beach on which I stood lay covered in plastic, from fully functioning thongs to tiny flecks; coloured shards. A remote island paradise, choking under the weight of rubbish that comes from far away.

I was left feeling a little helpless. My recent switch to using a bamboo toothbrush would do little to alleviate the gravity of this epidemic.

A month later and we read in the news that the world is, quite literally, on fire. The Amazon rainforest is the world's largest tropical forest. It's an area with torrential rain that almost never burns on its own, yet the blazes have burned for more than two weeks, growing so intense that they sent smoke all the way to São Paulo, Brazil's largest city.

But it's not just The Amazon that is burning. Fires in Siberia, The Canary Islands, Alaska and Greenland caused by record summer temperatures and long periods of drought (and 'slash and burn' land clearing in the Amazon) have prompted international concern.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change earlier this month reported that conserving areas like the Amazon rainforest will be integral to mitigating climate



change. But with the current pace of wildfires and deforestation, the world is rapidly heading in the wrong direction.

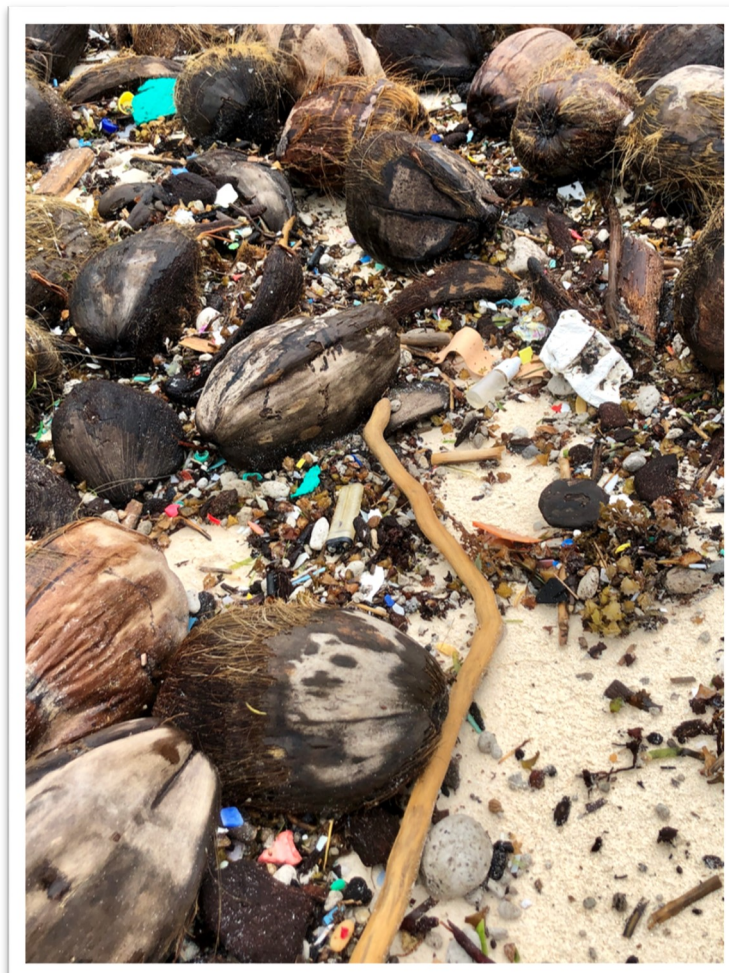
We might all be left feeling a little helpless. Disasters on such a massive scale, yet so far away from our Western Australian home, might well end up in the pile of things we can do nothing about.

Yet, as with other things in that pile, we bring our concerns before God.

Our prayers, our liturgy, our very lives as Christian people seek to engage with what God is doing in the world. “The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ” to, among other things, “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth” and when we as individuals, and as a church, seek to join in with this, we are playing a significant part in the building up of Christ’s body and the resourcing of Christ’s mission in the world.

This Sustainable September we do just that - bringing our feelings of helplessness to God, that along with all Creation we might be transformed, renewed and healed and drawn further into the life of Jesus Christ.

Paul



*‘The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.’*

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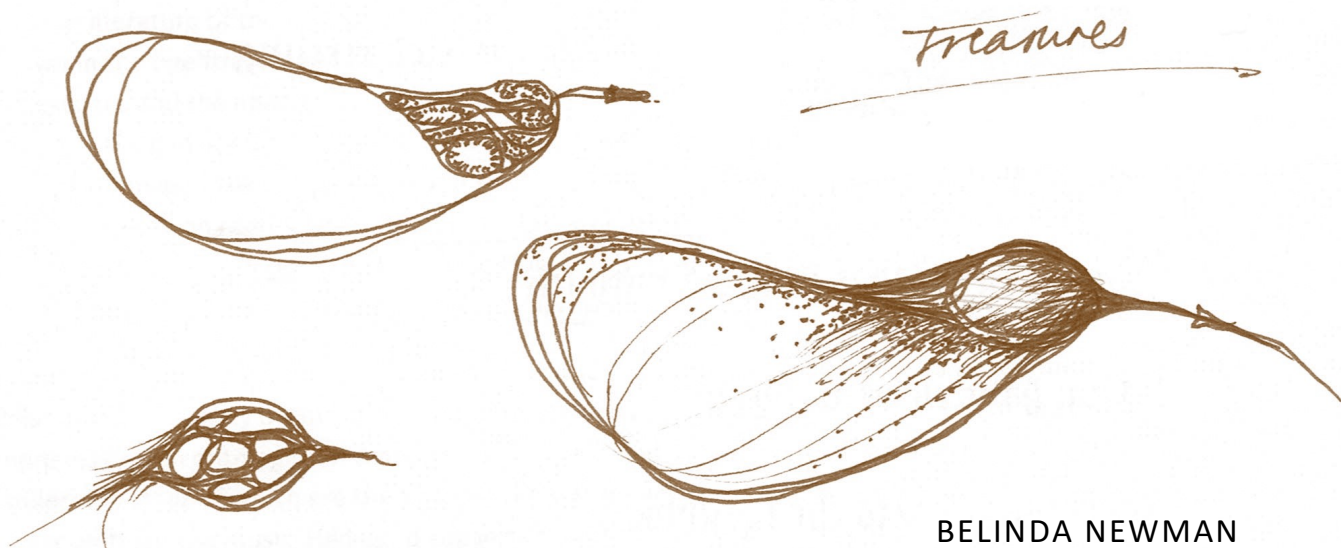
A Collect for Stewardship of Creation

Heavenly Father,
who created our world of good and beauty,
yet now stained by our neglect,
who through your Son is redeeming and reconciling
all things to yourself,
and by whose Spirit you will re-create the heavens and earth
where righteousness dwells,
so today empower the Body of Christ your Church
to keep in step with your re-creating Spirit,
that we may steward the resources gifted to us, live with
contentment and simplicity, and reflect your concern
for even the least of all creation,
through the same Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you
and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

MARK GROBICKI

Found Labyrinth Treasure

Precious seeds of life ready to be collected
and carried by God's breath alone.
Entwined, may our every choice count.



BELINDA NEWMAN

A CREATION PRAYER

Creator God who made all living things out of love,

We praise you for all creatures both great and small that proclaim your diversity in creation.

We thank you for birds of the air that majestically fly across vast expanses of sky.

We acclaim you for the marine life that proudly proclaims your glory from the great depths of the seas.

We give you thanks for mammals and insects that walk across, and under the ground.

We praise you for domestic animals and pets that provide comfort and joy to us, your people. May you also give them comfort and joy, and may they be treated with love, kindness and respect.

We thank you for all service animals and the assistance that they provide to those with (dis)Abilities - may their selfless acts of mercy remind us of your never-ending grace.

We thank you for your servant, Francis of Assissi, who declared your love to all. Help us to follow his example, and live out this love to all – humans and animals alike.

Father, help us to treat all of your creation with the respect that you intended. Help us not to exploit it, but rather guide us to be life-giving in how we treat all that you so lovingly gave us and hold dear.

By the precious life-giving blood of your Son, we pray,

Amen.

STUART GUTHRIE



A COLLECT FOR OCEAN SUNDAY



Holy God, stirrer of tidal wave and stiller of ocean pool:
Your mercy is greater than the deepest of the oceans.
Forgive us our misuse of creation's clean and bountiful waters.
Inspire us to good stewardship of oceans, rivers and streams;
so that they may continue to provide
sustenance and purification for all living things;
through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

SARAH STAPLETON

Prayers and Readings for Ocean Sunday

Prayer for the Day

God, our Creator, as we reflect on the mysteries of the ocean depths, we celebrate the wondrous design of the seas that surround us. Help us to discern how we have polluted our oceans and to empathise with the groaning of creation beneath us. Teach us to sense the presence of God in the tides and currents of the surging seas. Teach us to care for the oceans and all our waterways. In the name of the Wisdom of God, the creative force that designs and governs all creation. Amen.

Readings for Ocean Sunday

Old Testament: Job 38.1-18 ‘The Mysteries of Creation’

In this portrait of God creating the universe, Earth is constructed like grand edifice, the ocean is born like a baby and restrained with boundaries while down below lie domains called the deep and the realm of the dead. Earth with its oceans is a complex of profound mysteries designed by the Creator.

Psalms: Ps. 104.24-26 ‘A World Created by Wisdom’

The whole world is formed by the Wisdom of God thereby giving it all its discrete parts, laws, design and purpose. That world even includes domains where God ‘plays’ with wild creatures in the ocean.

Epistle: Ephesians 1.3-10 ‘The Cosmic Christ’

In Jesus, the Christ, we not only face the eternal mystery of forgiveness and salvation, but also the truth that as the cosmic one, Christ gathers all things together and unites the cosmos. The cosmic Christ fills the universe!

Gospel: Luke 5.1-11 ‘Facing the Deep’

When Peter and his friends catch no fish, Jesus asks them to take a risk and cast into ‘the deep’, the realm of the unknown. An even greater risk faces the disciples when they one day catch humans with a new message.

A REFLECTION FOR OCEAN SUNDAY

Rev. Leah Schade (with permission)

God's Wisdom can be seen as the force of creativity behind Creation and the energy that enables the human and other-than-human members of the Earth community to fulfill their roles. To understand this, it will be helpful to provide a framework within which to understand the concept of Wisdom. Elizabeth Johnson's work in 'She Who Is' and 'Women, Earth and Creator Spirit' is one possibility for such a framework. She suggests that Sophia, the female personification of Holy Wisdom, can and should be the lens through which the Trinity is viewed, as well as the language through which we speak and hear about God. Thus she coins the terms "Spirit-Sophia," "Jesus-Sophia," and "Mother-Sophia" as an alternative Trinitarian formulation, which places Wisdom/Sophia not in a subordinate position, but as the controlling metaphor.

Johnson believes that the power of the Woman Wisdom image may enable contemporary women and other oppressed and marginalized members of the human community to move beyond the restrictions of patriarchal circumscriptions and realize their power to effect change for themselves, Earth, and their children. According to Johnson, the Church is the most obvious candidate for modelling what it means to answer Wisdom's call to undergo transformative attention to those most vulnerable, including the species, habitats, and human beings most threatened by oppression, and to take responsibility for the health and respectful treatment of all Creation.

Applying this Sophia/Wisdom framework to the readings for this Sunday yields interesting points of entry for preaching. For example, Psalm 104:24 states that "in wisdom" (hokmah in Hebrew) God created the earth. Johnson reminds us that not only is the grammatical gender of the word for wisdom feminine in Hebrew, but "the biblical portrait of Wisdom is consistently female, casting her as sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, teacher, preacher, maker of justice, and

A REFLECTION FOR OCEAN SUNDAY

a host of other women's roles. In every instance, Wisdom symbolizes transcendent power pervading and ordering the world, both nature and human beings, interacting with them all to lure them onto the path of life,” (Women, Earth and Creator Spirit, p. 51).

Wisdom, then, has many roles to play in God’s ongoing Creation, working alongside Jesus and the Holy Spirit to enliven, restore, teach and bring justice to our world. In the reading from Luke, for example, we see an example of the way in which elements of Earth become Jesus’ teaching partner. When Jesus tells Peter to let down his net into the lake of Gennesaret, Peter protests, saying in effect that their entire fishing trip had yielded nothing to that point—so what difference would it make now? Yet when Peter acquiesces and follows Jesus’ command, the amount of fish in the net is so large they need the nearby boats to come haul it in. The waters and the fish play an important didactic role in teaching Peter and the others that God’s power and abundance never cease to surprise us, gracing us beyond all expectations.

But the reality that also needs to be stated is that if Peter should let down his nets in open waters today, most likely his haul would be significantly compromised. Overfishing would result in smaller and fewer fish. And the nets would be heavy, not from aquatic life but from a disgusting array of trash, poisons, and toxic waste. Simply enter the words “trash in the ocean” on Google to see pictures of floating islands of trash both on the surface and below the water. Human waste chokes and poisons marine life in ways that cause immense suffering that most of us never see, nor want to face.

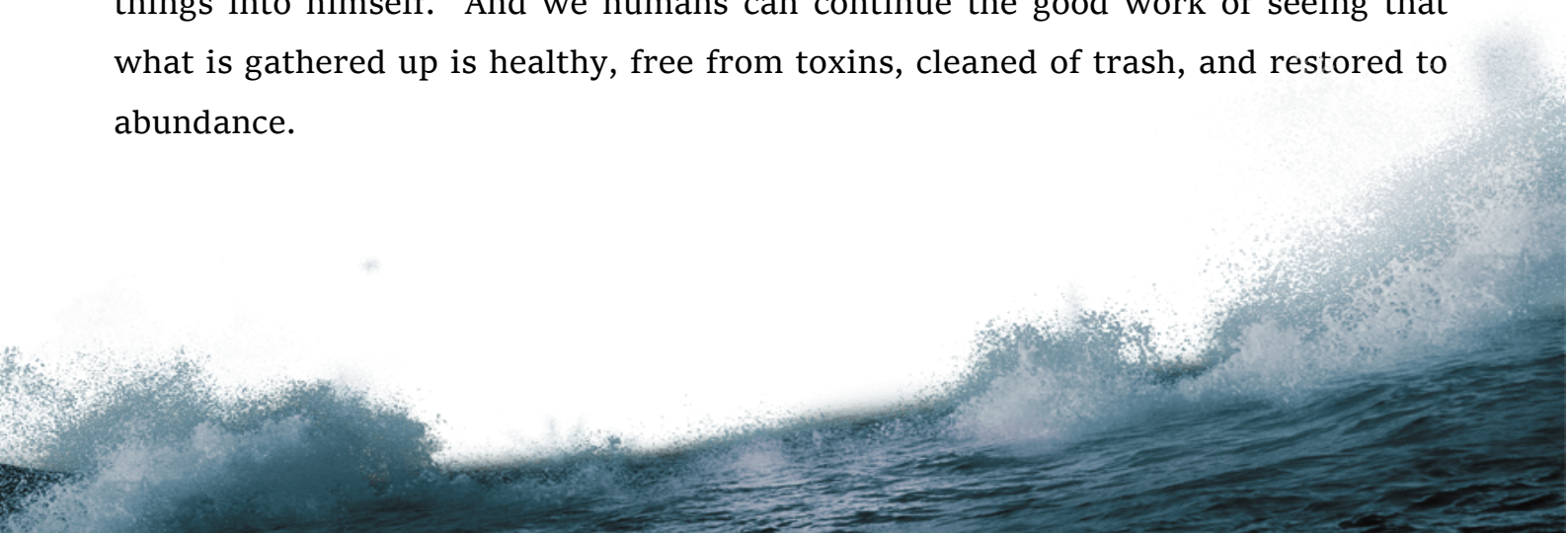
Jesus’ teaching on the Gennesaret Sea is not just a metaphor for how the Kingdom of God will manifest itself. That teachable moment has important significance for this particular time of ecological destruction, because it shows us that the very illustration that Jesus uses—the basic, natural and life-giving phenomenon of fish thriving in a healthy aquatic ecosystem—that very process is under threat of annihilation. This is a troubling, but accurate reframing of the Gennesaret fishing expedition for today’s world.

A REFLECTION FOR OCEAN SUNDAY

But just as Jesus' teaching ministry in first century Palestine was meant to shake people up and get them thinking about things in a new way so that they could hear the Gospel clearly, so must our teaching and preaching today include the Good News. We hear so many examples of what human beings are doing to desecrate the Earth, it is important for us—especially as Christians who proclaim a theology of the cross that reminds us that God shows up in the last place you would think to look—to proclaim the Good News about what God is doing to restore the oceans, seas, rivers and streams, especially as they connect to the human and other-than-human lives around and within them.

In Job 38:1-18, we notice that the words “knowledge,” “know,” “comprehend” and “understanding” are prominent in God's questions to Job. Realizing how little we truly know and understand about Creation helps to humble the arrogance and hubris of the human. Part of our calling as Creation-Care-Christians is to devote ourselves to learning about the ecosystems that sustain us. Congregations can host speakers and fairs that highlight local watersheds, lead trash clean-up events through local waterways, and write letters asking legislators and corporations to propose and support better waste management practices and policies.

The Christological statement of faith made by Paul in Ephesians 1:3-10 tells us that it is specifically through Jesus Christ that wisdom (Sophia in Greek) and insight (phroneisis in Greek) help us to understand the mysteries that once were closed to us. And what is it that we are being enabled to comprehend? It is that God is “gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth,” (v. 10). Our preaching can echo this proclamation that Christ continues to gather up all things into himself. And we humans can continue the good work of seeing that what is gathered up is healthy, free from toxins, cleaned of trash, and restored to abundance.



BIBLICAL APPROACH TOWARDS NATURE

There is a misconception that human being is the crown of God's Creation. The first Creation story ends on the seventh day when God takes rest. In Genesis 2:2, *"And on the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done."* God's rest and hallowing on the seventh day, known as Sabbath, is the crown of Creation. The earth also has the right to rest on the sabbath.

In Leviticus 25:4, *"but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard."* God provides exceptional care for the vulnerable and other living creatures in Leviticus 25: 6-7 it says, *"You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath-you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food."*

In the instructions, to celebrate the jubilee year Leviticus 25: 8-24 and Deuteronomy 15:1-18 categorically mentioned that the land must be returned to its owner and the land belongs to God (Leviticus 25:23). Therefore handling the earth with care is like spiritual service because the land belongs to God. Therefore, exploiting earth without taking care of the ecosystem is a spiritual issue.

JAMES GEORGE



BIBLICAL APPROACH TOWARDS NATURE

The commandment to human beings to "rule" over the Creation (Genesis 1:28) has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by Christians. "You have put all things under their feet" (Psalm 8: 6) is also misapprehended and considered as the license to trample the Creation. God has given the responsibility for Adam to "till it and keep it." (Gen. 2:15). However, due to industrialization, nature and its resources are recklessly exploited by human being for their greed and self-interest. In an absolute sense, it is not the superintending authority over Creation but a partnership with God which will lead the Creation to its fullness. In Romans 8:19 *"For the Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God"*?

Creation is a partner in God's covenant

Creation was one of the partners in the covenant which God created with Noah in Genesis 9:8-17. This partnership is as important as the partnership between members of the family. In Genesis 9:9-10, God is making a covenant with everyone and to their generations. The covenant between human being and the multitude of living beings is as important as the partnership between human beings. The covenant will prevail only when all the factors are considered as partners. Patriarchy and suzerainty over nature are opposed to the concept of partnership.

The peculiarity of God's covenant with Noah was held much before the covenant between Abraham and God. Therefore, the covenant between Noah was not for a particular region or a selected group but including all human being and other creatures. In Genesis 9: 12, God said, *"This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations."* This is the promise given by God, and we are partners in that covenant.



“The sea is his, for he made it”



A COLLECT FOR FAUNA AND FLORA

Creator God who nurtures great forests and tiny creatures,
You hate nothing that you have made
You sent your Son to inspire in us love for each other;
to gather us into loving communion
with your earth and all creation;
so that we may see your divine presence in all;
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever. Amen

SARAH STAPLETON



A SERMON FOR FAUNA SUNDAY

Rev. Marcy Wieties (with permission)



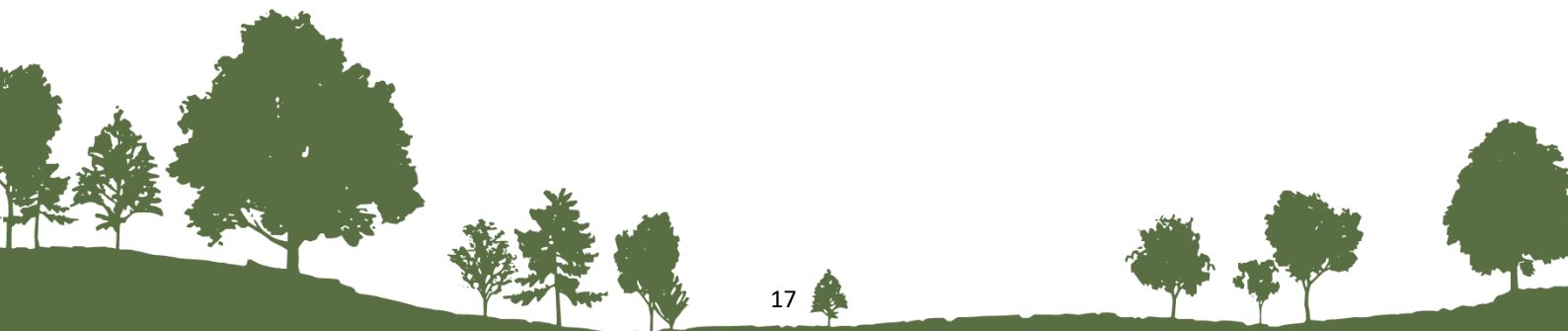
One of the hobbies I enjoy most is animal photography. I've been doing it for years. I don't really remember how it started, but it probably started with a particularly cute picture of one of our cats or a once-in-a-lifetime zoo moment caught on film. These days, I have albums of these pictures, pictures of insects in our backyard, zoo animals, farm animals, our own pets. Pictures of animals with fur, feathers, scales, stripes, spots, prisms, four legs, two legs, six legs... Admittedly none of critters with eight or a hundred legs...I do have my limits!

I've always said that the eyes say it all. Not only do they come in so many different colors and shapes, but they frequently express emotion or personality. Each individual animal has a distinct personality and sometimes you can just see it. Sometimes you just get that one magical shot that shows you who that animal is, gives you a glimpse of maybe what they're thinking.

It's fun to capture not only their personalities, but also their relationships with each other. I have some particularly touching shots of a mother goat nuzzling her newborn, literally just minutes old and some cute ones of one of our cats snuggling with my daughter's guinea pig on my kitchen floor. Believe it or not, they were really good friends!

You will never hear me say "it's just an animal!" about any critter. My kids will readily tell you the story of the day I spent a half-hour of my life sitting on my patio trying to get just the right picture of a fly whose colors were just beautiful in the sunlight!

Furry, feathered, finned, four-legged, winged...animals play a big role in my life! And they play an important role in the Bible.



A SERMON FOR FAUNA

The Bible tells us that we are related to, and interdependent with, all creatures... right from the very beginning. Genesis 1 calls us to marvel at and love all creatures. In the beginning, the Bible says, “God said, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals....’ And it was so” They aren’t the product of happenstance or fortuitous natural processes any more than humans are. Scripture even tells us that the breath of life resides within them.

And all of those creatures point to God as love. God loves life so much he creates it in seeming endless variety, a living display of the natural beauty God has built into creation. At the conclusion of the creation account in Genesis 1, God looked at “all he had made” and declared it “very good”... even before humankind comes on the scene. Humans are the crowning achievement of God’s creative activity, but we should not let that truth cloud our appreciation for the rest of creation or diminish our responsibilities toward it.

Did you hear that? I said “responsibilities toward it.” Not “ruling of it.” Yes, we’ve all undoubtedly heard Genesis 1:26. God completes the sixth day of creation, and declares that humans should have dominion over “fish in the sea and birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Such an easy verse to misinterpret! It is, in reality, a call to work for the care, wellbeing, and freedom of all of God’s creatures. Humans should “have dominion”...It’s not a spirit of superiority, a distance, of domination or of exploitation. It is, rather, to inspire a spirit of leadership, of guidance, of aid and support for those whom God loves.

And in that vein, think about Noah...We hear that Noah saves two of every kind of animal on his ark during the great flood. But have you ever noticed that God didn’t tell Noah to go out and round up the animals? We don’t see Noah wandering around, gathering species. Instead, God told him to bring them into the ark, which meant to simply receive them. When it was time for the flood to begin, the text says the animals “went into the ark to Noah”. Perhaps the best explanation for the migration of the animals to Noah’s ark is that God cared

A SERMON FOR FAUNA SUNDAY

enough about the animals to communicate directly with them. God told Noah to build an ark ...and then God drew them to the ark. God communicated with them directly, and they responded. Noah was, as I just mentioned, inspired to a spirit of leadership, of guidance, of aid and support for those whom God loves. And after the Flood, God covenanted with all flesh on the earth, including the animals, never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The fact that God would enter into a covenant with the animals tells us something of God's love for them.

It isn't just the Old Testament alone that points to the role of animals in our world and in our lives. Have you even noticed how often animals play a role in the story of Jesus' life and ministry? He is born in a manger, a feeding trough for livestock and surrounded by animals. Of all the places the Son of God could have entered this world, he did so among lowly creatures in a stable. And a dove descends on him, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and wild animals and angels sustain him while he is tempted in the desert. He rides a donkey into Jerusalem on his way to the cross.

He also uses creatures regularly to teach his lessons. He calls his disciples "fishers of men" and tells them that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. He speaks frequently of sheep and shepherds, and of a hen and chicks. He teaches that God feeds the birds of the field, taking personal pleasure in caring for them. How much more so he will care for the needs of humans!

Drawing from the entire biblical witness, we can make some important conclusions about how to think about animals.

All of creation was made with the ability and the call to worship and



A SERMON FOR FAUNA SUNDAY

glorify God. That can happen in so many different ways. Animals point to their Creator in their behaviors, in their appearances, in their relationships with us and with each other. And part of our human calling is to enable them, help them fulfill that calling and reach their full potential as amazing creations of God. Animals are not only worthy of our respect. They deserve it.

Scripture commands us to take care of the animals around us, those within our homes and those outside our walls. I can't even begin in these few minutes to list all of the times we are told that we are to be responsible for and to the animals who share this earth with us...from Proverbs 12, which tells us "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal," to Deuteronomy 22, where God promises a long life to those who will watch over wild birds.

So what does all of this mean to us on a practical level? I'm sure we can all agree that we have a responsibility for the creatures who share this Earth with us, but when it boils right down to it, what does that mean for you in your daily life?

Well, for one thing, it means that we need to appreciate the uniqueness of each and every animal, their intrinsic worth. All cats are not the same, all dogs are not the same, all squirrels are not the same, all whales are not the same, and on and on and on. We need to approach and consider every animal of this Earth as an individual created by God and worthy of love and admiration. With that as a starting point, it's a whole lot harder to disregard or ignore the animals, isn't it?

We need to educate our young, teach empathy and gentleness, unconditional love. One way to do that is through the way we live with our pets. We don't OWN our pets; we share our homes with them...and that changes everything about our interactions with them!



A SERMON FOR FAUNA SUNDAY

We need to appreciate that God's creatures can be spiritual teachers. Each creature shows us qualities to admire-the teamwork of an anthill, the loyalty of your dog, the emotions of an elephant, the playfulness of a dolphin. We are to not only oversee, but to learn from our animal neighbors.



Creatures also help us find answers to technical problems. We can learn from ways creatures facilitate chemical reactions without emitting toxic pollution, or how ecosystems ensure that nothing is wasted. Chemists and engineers are becoming increasingly interested in bio-mimicry, imitating nature's solutions to technical problems. For instance, a **bullet train in Japan was the fastest train in the world, traveling 200 miles per hour...but** air pressure changes produced large thunder claps every time the train emerged from a tunnel. You could hear it for a quarter mile. The train's chief engineer, a bird-watcher, discovered that modeling the front-end of the train after the beak of a kingfisher could make a huge difference. Kingfishers dive from the air into bodies of water to catch fish with very little splash. Redesigning the trains to look more like kingfishers resulted not only in a quieter train, but 15% less electricity use even while the train travels 10% faster.

We need to be always mindful that we are part of an interdependent web of life. We need to consider our lifestyle choices and what impact they have on God's many creatures: what we buy, what we eat, where we build our homes and our buildings, and our parking lots, how we vacation or play. Over-fishing and over-hunting, habitat destruction, climate change, and other factors now threaten the existence of 1 in 5 species! Animals are endangered for the sake of profit, killed by environmental disasters caused by our carelessness and lost habitats. They are neglected and abused, inhumanely raised on factory farms. The things we do every day influence the very survival of the marvelous array of life on this planet we call our home.

If you walk away with one startling statistic today, let it be this. Species

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extinction, for almost every creature except for humans, is at least 100-1,000 times higher than nature intended. Doesn't that blow your mind? The World Wildlife Fund's 2014 Living Planet Report found that wildlife populations of vertebrate species—mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish—have declined by 52% over the last 40 years!

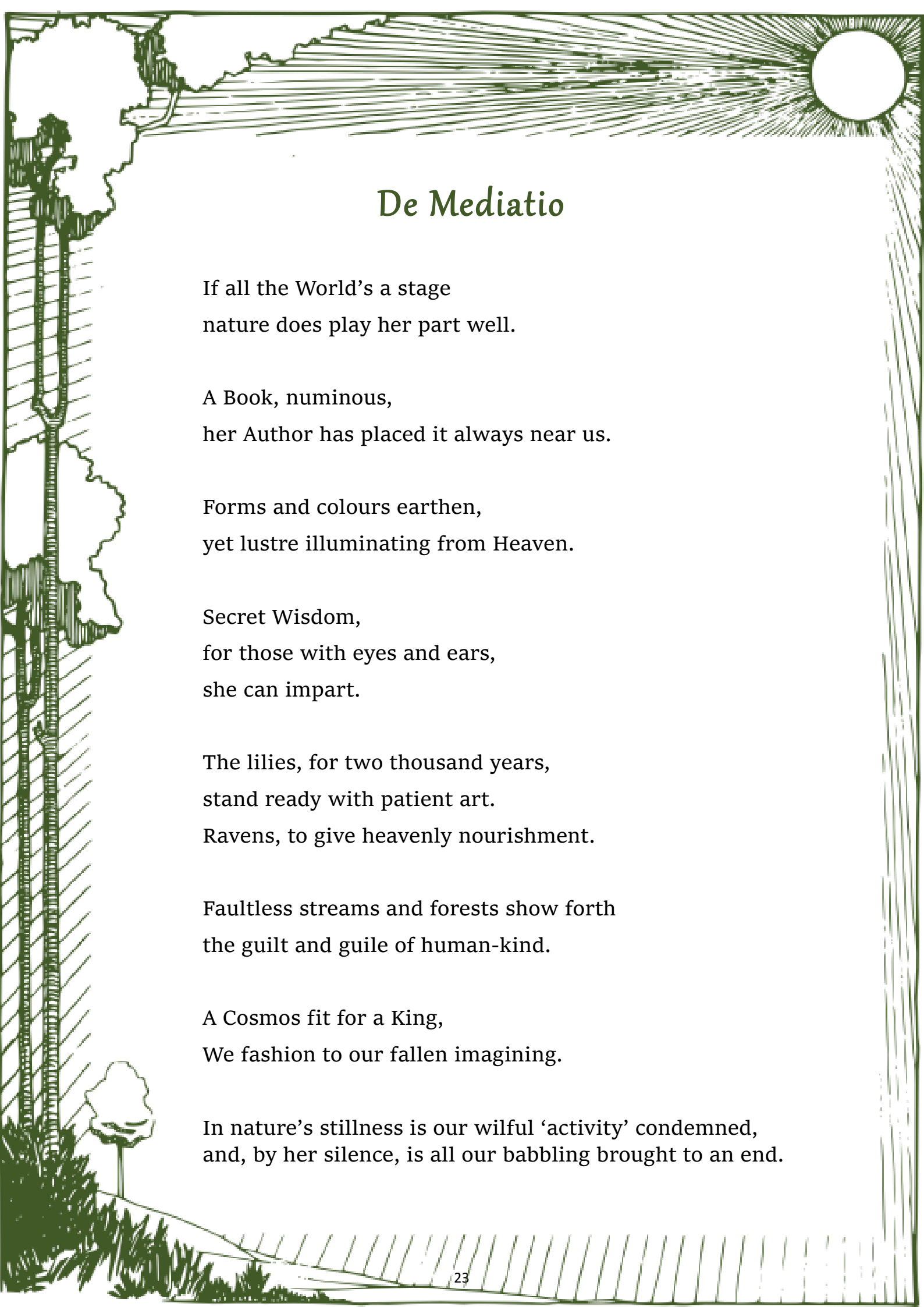
The starting point for us as followers of Christ? Discern where you can improve your role and relationship with animals. Dominion is correctly understood as an invitation to imitate Christ's service to us through our service to creation. Dominion is truly manifested by a spirit of leadership, of guidance, of aid and support for those whom God loves.

We share this world with billions of animals. No one knows for sure how many species of animals exist on Earth. In fact, some 10,000 species of animals are discovered each year, with over one and a half million species already described. Some scientists estimate that the total number of species on Earth is about 50 million. One mathematician has estimated that according to his data, the total number of individual animals on this planet is about 20 quintillion...that's 20 billion billion...a 2 with 19 zeros! To put that in perspective, there are only 7 billion of us.

We are, by far, a minority. And yet, we are the ones called to ensure the survival and care of the others...to care for the other creatures as Jesus would.

Remember those old WWJD bracelets...I'm thinking maybe that's a good starting point to approach the issue...What would Jesus do?





De Mediatio

If all the World's a stage
nature does play her part well.

A Book, numinous,
her Author has placed it always near us.

Forms and colours earthen,
yet lustre illuminating from Heaven.

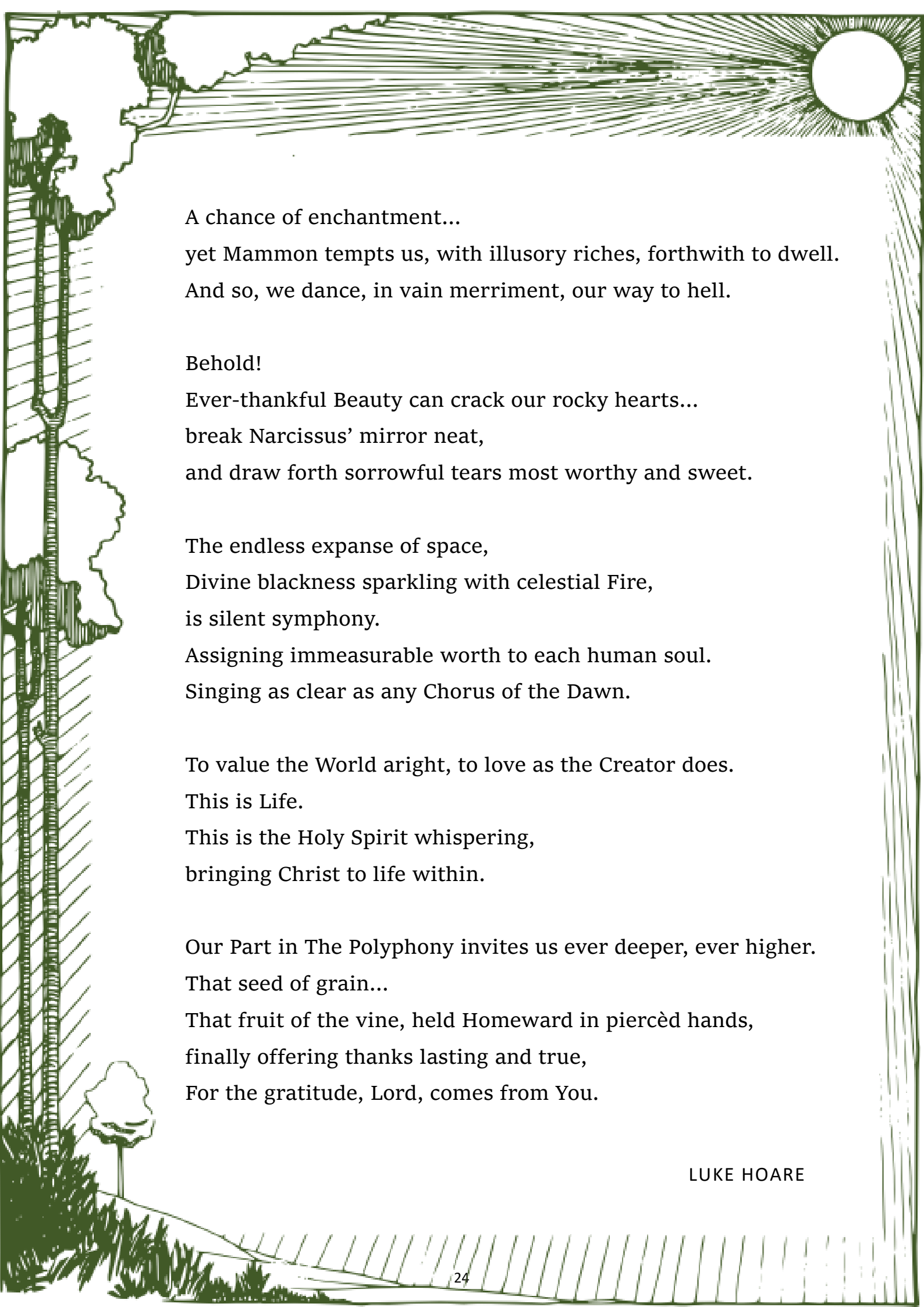
Secret Wisdom,
for those with eyes and ears,
she can impart.

The lilies, for two thousand years,
stand ready with patient art.
Ravens, to give heavenly nourishment.

Faultless streams and forests show forth
the guilt and guile of human-kind.

A Cosmos fit for a King,
We fashion to our fallen imagining.

In nature's stillness is our wilful 'activity' condemned,
and, by her silence, is all our babbling brought to an end.



A chance of enchantment...
yet Mammon tempts us, with illusory riches, forthwith to dwell.
And so, we dance, in vain merriment, our way to hell.

Behold!
Ever-thankful Beauty can crack our rocky hearts...
break Narcissus' mirror neat,
and draw forth sorrowful tears most worthy and sweet.

The endless expanse of space,
Divine blackness sparkling with celestial Fire,
is silent symphony.
Assigning immeasurable worth to each human soul.
Singing as clear as any Chorus of the Dawn.

To value the World aright, to love as the Creator does.
This is Life.
This is the Holy Spirit whispering,
bringing Christ to life within.

Our Part in The Polyphony invites us ever deeper, ever higher.
That seed of grain...
That fruit of the vine, held Homeward in piercèd hands,
finally offering thanks lasting and true,
For the gratitude, Lord, comes from You.

LUKE HOARE

A COLLECT FOR STORM SUNDAY

Almighty protector, loving Father; God of wind and fire,
You are the calm in the centre of the storm:
Shelter us from the tempests of life with your love and mercy,
So that we might learn to shelter each other
Through the power of the Holy Spirit
and in unity with your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Amen

SARAH STAPLETON





A REFLECTION FOR STORM SUNDAY

Reading: Job 28.20-27

In celebrating with creation, there is often a tendency to ignore nature in the raw, the storms, hurricanes and tornadoes that are also part of the weather system of our planet. Fierce winds are as much a part of our world as the air we breathe.

Throughout the Bible we not only meet storms of various kinds, but also occasions where God makes God's presence felt through a storm. Are storms simply expressions of God's power or something more? If we were to listen to all the elements of storm or watch the ways of a storm, might we learn something about the very nature of creation and God's presence in creation.

Discuss: Have you been caught outside in the midst of a storm, a hurricane or a tornado? What was it like? What was your reaction? Intense excitement? Did you gain a new appreciation of nature or feel terrified?

Background

To appreciate the remarkable message of Job 28, we need to keep in mind two biblical traditions. The first tradition is the appearance of God in storms. Psalm 29 is a bold portrayal of the Lord as a storm God. Some scholars even suggest that this psalm was originally ascribed to the storm god Baal and later applied to the God of Israel.

In Psalm 29, the thunder of the storm is the voice of God. That voice is so powerful it causes ocean waters to rage, the mighty cedar trees of Lebanon to break and forests to be stripped bare. God's thundering voice also causes lightning to appear as flashes of consuming fire. God's voice can be a devastating power on Earth; in response the beings in the heavenly temple above respond with their own 'gloria'!

The second tradition we need to keep in mind is the wisdom thinking that we began to explore in the previous Bible studies for Ocean and Fauna Sundays. Job,

you will recall, was urged to examine the natural world, both animate and inanimate domains, to discern in them the way of things, the inner code or wisdom that governs the nature and function of all parts of creation.

In Job 28 the world of storms and the world of wisdom meet in a most remarkable way.

EXPLORING THE TEXT (Job 28.1-22)

The first part of Job 28 poses the age-old question: Where can wisdom be found? Human beings are experts at probing the depths of Earth to find precious stones and gold dust. Miners are willing to plunge deep into the darkness of Earth to find the valuable ore they seek. But can they find wisdom down below? (28.1-6)

Even natural creatures like hawks and falcons, who have amazing eyesight, or wild animals that have extraordinary instincts, cannot necessarily discern the presence of wisdom. (28.7-8) Wisdom is something deep, hidden, mysterious.

Wisdom is not something that can be found in the deeps of the sea, nor can it be bought with gold or silver. It is far more valuable and inaccessible than the most precious of jewels. (28.12-19)

Where then is wisdom found? What is its place or locus in the design of creation? It seems to elude humans and remain hidden from the eyes of eagles. The realm of death says it has heard a rumour of where wisdom is found, but no more. Wisdom remains the most elusive, deep and wondrous mystery of creation. (28.20-22)

Read Job 28.23-28

Discuss: Without reading further in the chapter, what, in your opinion, is this wisdom that the poet is discussing? Where do you think it may be found? What would your answer be to the poet's question at this stage in the study?

The Hebrew of verse 23 states that

*God understands its way
And God knows its place.*

In other words, God understand the way or nature of wisdom and its locus/place in order of creation. As we noted in earlier studies, the 'way' of something is its inner code or character. The mysterious way of wisdom is something God understands, even if humans struggle to do so.

The text then goes on to describe how God also knows the place of wisdom in the scheme of things. Like a good scientist, God undertakes a close observation of everything on Earth, everything beneath the skies above. He scrutinises and analyses the natural world in search of wisdom. (28.24)

The verses that follow may surprise us. God observes how four things were designed by God: the wind, the waters, the rain and the lightning. Together these four elements suggest a storm. God's observation, however, is not simply to note the presence of these elements. Rather, God analyses their design and construction. The wind is weighed, the volume of the waters determined, rules for the rain established and the 'way' of lightning identified. (28.25-26)

In the very construction of the 'way' or design of each of these elements of the storm, God 'sees' wisdom, discovers its presence, uncovers its place. So the place of wisdom is not in one location. Wisdom is that inner dimension of all things that gives them their very nature, the underlying design of things, the hidden impulse that both governs and controls even the elements of a storm.

How does God respond when God discovers the presence of wisdom in the

wondrous world God has created? After creating things in Genesis One, God responded with 'very good', or better perhaps, 'fantastic!'

In this account, God first sees or discovers



wisdom. Then God announces its presence, telling the world where wisdom can be found. God's next step is to fix wisdom in its place, preserve it as the valuable sensor at the core of all creation things. Finally God goes back and starts exploring wisdom in creation once again. (28.27)

God is here portrayed as the model wise person, the scientist of old, who searches, discovers and then returns to re-search the very wonder that has been uncovered. And if humans wish to discover wisdom in the world, God's way of operating offers a genuine model to follow. The 'fear of the Lord' is ultimately following the way of God in the search to find wisdom as a governing impulse deep within this creation. (28.28)

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

Discuss: Where would you begin to search for wisdom in the natural world today? How would the model of God searching assist you? Can we also know this deep wisdom now that God has discovered it when creating? Will you look at storms differently as a result of this text?

Storms of various kinds have long been part of the natural order around the world. Human beings have learned to live with these storms as an integral part of the weather patterns of the planet. In the storm one can discern the way of the wind, the lightning and the rain for those who live on the sea shore or in the rain forest.

With the advent of global warming, the weather patterns are changing. This warming has not only caused the arctic circles to start melting and the water levels of the ocean to rise, thereby threatening many residences along the coast. The warming process has also increased the temperature of key channels and currents in the oceans of the world, currents that affect the weather pattern. The number and kind of storms across the globe are beginning to increase and threaten many habitats. Storms are on the increase.

Discuss: Where will we find the wisdom to ward off the disasters that have begun to invade our world because of global warming? Is there a way to understand the weather and pursue a model of global cooling? Yes, where can wisdom be found?

CONNECTING WITH CHRIST

Read Luke 8.22-25

The story of Jesus stilling the storm is well known to us. Jesus is fast asleep in the boat as they travel across a lake to the other side and apparently unaware of the conditions around the lake. A windstorm threatens to fill the boat with water, a crisis that the disciples who were fisherman would have experienced before.

This time they wake Jesus from his sleep and seem to panic rather than fall into their usual storm crisis mode. They cry out, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!'

Jesus wakes up, rebukes the storm and chides the disciples for their lack of faith!

It is traditional to read this story as an example of Jesus' miraculous power, his capacity not only to heal the sick, but also to intervene in the course of nature. Here he controls a storm that terrifies the disciples.

It is also possible to read this narrative in the light of the wisdom theme analysed above. Jesus is not so much exhibiting an extraordinary power play, but rather connecting with the wisdom in the storm, the inner impulse that governs the storm. Jesus, like God in Job 28, sees the wisdom in the storm and knows how to move that wisdom to produce calm. Jesus is in tune with nature and in tune with wisdom.

Discuss: Why is it important for us to recognise that Jesus not only connects with our inner beings, but also with the inner impulses of nature? Does this point ahead to the claim of Paul that Jesus is that power which reconciles nature to God as well as all humans?

HUMANITY, CREATION AND ECOCARE



Many churches worldwide celebrate September as the Season of Creation. It has become a month to focus on care for God's creation through focused worship, liturgy, consciousness raising and practical action.

As Anglicans, we've been doing this for some time now. The Anglican Communion Environmental Network was formed in 1999, around the same time other western churches started similar endeavours. The EcoCare Commission was created by Synod in 2006 and, as part of the Season of Creation, we have produced our annual Sustainable September resources for nearly a decade.

The Orthodox of course, beat us all to it, with Patriarch Dimitrios proclaiming September 1 as a day of prayer for creation back in 1989. We can however be forgiven for thinking that even he was coming to the party a bit late. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in 1972, the first Earth Day celebrated a couple of years earlier in 1970 and Greenpeace formed in 1971.

It is arguable then that the churches are *responding* to changing attitudes within the secular world rather than leading the way in the Care for God's creation. This response is a very good thing and the churches have, by and large, embraced care for creation as a major aspect of Mission. It forms the Fifth Mark of Mission of our Anglican Communion, "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth." This fifth Mark is the rationale for the existence of EcoCare in this diocese.

There are many wonderful secular responses to environmental degradation and sustainability. We have experienced one just recently with the banning of single use plastic bags. So, does EcoCare exist to simply add much needed energy to those endeavours, or are we called to something else? What unique insights, and vision could we bring to the table?



HUMANITY, CREATION AND ECO CARE

God provides the answer through revelation by reminding us of our foundations. In the Book of Genesis God famously declares Creation as good. Everything, from the tiniest spore of fungus to the great, overwhelming panoply of galaxies that surround us – all created, completely out of exuberant love, by God as his ‘good creation’.

Crucially however, humanity is not created separate to creation. In the first account of creation in Genesis we are created on the fifth day as part of the sweep of creation. The single stated purpose for our existence; to be stewards of creation. In the second account of Genesis, we are formed from the dust of the ground, Adam the earth creature, formed from Adamah the earth herself. Our reason for existence – to tend a garden.

Scripture then does not reveal humanity as a disconnected observer in the world. It does not even reveal us as connected to the world. It says boldly and clearly that we are formed of the world, as part of creation, as part of the land. And this is what we, as Christians, can bring to the environmental understanding of the day.

The environmental movement is becoming very good at articulating how we as humans can, should and must respond to the ongoing degradation of the earth. Yet this is still a paradigm of us – humanity – responding to and acting upon, the earth, no matter how connected we feel to it.

Christianity challenges and dismantles that paradigm – we are of the earth, we are part of the seamless tapestry of the unknowable economy of Creation. Here in Australia we are blessed to learn this truth by listening to the voice of our aboriginal sisters, brothers and companions who have lived it for 60 000 years. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams puts it like this:

“Renewing the face of the earth, then, is an enterprise not of imposing some private human vision on a passive nature but of living in such a way as to bring more clearly to light the interconnectedness of all things and their dependence on what we cannot finally master or understand.”

HUMANITY, CREATION AND ECO CARE

The first concept here, radical interdependence, is now a key concept in modern ecology. Its ramifications and outworking's are only just being fully explored. To this crucial awareness of interdependence, Christianity adds and insists upon radical *dependence*. Dependence on the One who is both immanent and transcendent, beyond even this 90 billion light years span of space, full of galaxies, stars, planets, comets, mountains and lakes and each one of us.

“For the Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God”

(Romans 8:19)

Creation, the environment, the earth herself is inextricably linked with humanity's growth into the likeness of God. This means you and me and everyone we know. As Rowan Williams reminds us we cannot fully understand this mysterious economy of salvation; but we trust that as we participate more in the life of God, creation itself is affected by that participation.

These insights – ourselves as created beings within creation, our participation in God affecting creation, and our continuous dependence on a God who brings all into being at every moment – these are great gifts we can bring to the broader environmental movement.

This is the role of EcoCare and we will be sharing these insights as we connect more deeply with those outside the church working for the renewal of the earth. This is part of our mission, which is a mission that is shared by everyone reading these words. Because we all have the same Mission, received in Baptism. EcoCare focuses on one Mark of Mission, but we all share this One Mission, as we are One Church.

PEREGRIN CAMPBELL-OSGOOD



A COLLECT FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

Almighty God of the heavens and the firmament,
The planets and the stars were made beautiful by your hand:
Help us to see your light in a world stalked by darkness
So that we might share it with
our sisters and brothers from nearby and far away;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord .

Amen

SARAH STAPLETON



A HYMN FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

Sung to the tune of 'Amazing Grace'

Words: © Norman Habel 2004

1. Amazing is the Christ who died
To void all sin and curse,
Just as amazing is his life
That fills the universe.
2. The risen Christ is more than one
Who waits on some far shore;
In, with and under ev'ry thing
Christ is the living core.
3. The hidden Christ sustains for us
The blueprint of the skies,
The wisdom in each fragile form,
The soul that lights the eyes.
4. The cosmic Christ moves deep below
To heal the wounds within,
When all creation groans in pain
Because of human sin.
5. The cosmos hails the Christ,
the One Who reconciles all things,
'Til all creation rises new
With healing in her wings
6. As Christ unites the universe,
Restores this Earth once more,
A cosmic song reverberates,
A rich symphonic score.



A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

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THE WISDOM BEHIND THE WORLD

Proverbs 8.22-31

The Beginning

The image above is by an Indigenous Australian seeking to express how the Creator Spirit, also known as the Rainbow Spirit, separates the components of the cosmos, by separating light from darkness, one system from many systems. Behind the universe among many Indigenous peoples, there is a deep spiritual impulse that governs the cosmos in wondrous ways.

The Hubble space telescope continues to discover images from the distant reaches of the cosmos that amaze and fascinate both artists and scientists. Recently the Spitzer telescope snapped a picture that looked like ‘two icy blues eyes peering through an elaborate, swirling red mask’. Another image looked like ‘an offensive finger’ suggesting that ‘God is left-handed’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13-14, 2006) The patterns and possibilities in the gallery of these galaxies is endless, partly dependent on the imagination of humans but even more on the imagination of God.

A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY



Discuss: What kind of God do you discern when you peer into the distant galaxies of the cosmos? Earth may be but a speck of stardust in the cosmos, but are the myriad of mysteries in the smallest life-form on Earth any less staggering? Where is God in this world of amazing worlds?

Background

To appreciate the unique image portrayed in the Earth reading for this study, we need to recognize that this text seems to provide a kind of charter for many Old Testament passages about wisdom that we have discussed in the previous studies. Basically there are four types of wisdom in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament:

- 1) teachings about how to live with God in society handed down by the wise, often called fathers, from one generation to the next (eg., Prov. 5.1-2),
- 2) instructive insights about life and the natural world gained by close observation of nature and society (eg., Prov. 6.6)
- 3) the way or code that is innate in each component of both animate and inanimate creation that governs their essential nature (eg., Job 29.36)
- 4) a presence or partner that existed prior to, and accompanied, the creation process from the beginning (Prov. 8.22-31).

It is the fourth of these understandings of wisdom, the wisdom charter, that we explore in this Bible study.

Discuss: Explore ways in which you in your life have sought to acquire wisdom? Are the categories outlined above helpful? How is God the ultimate source of all such wisdom? Do we humans have an innate capacity to pursue wisdom?

A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Proverbs 8.22-23

There is some debate among scholars as to the precise translation of this passage. After years of analysis, I would argue that the best—and most literal—rendering of 8.2 is:

*YHWH acquired me in the beginning,
his Way before his works.*

The person speaking is Woman Wisdom. She is claiming that before God created anything, before the creation of the cosmos, she was there. Just as wise humans are expected to ‘acquire’ wisdom, God ‘acquired’ wisdom before anything else. God acquired wisdom as the first stage in the creation process. Wisdom was and continues to be a primal force in the origins and operations of the cosmos.

The second key concept in this verse is that Woman Wisdom is God’s way, a way that preceded God’s creative works. As we have noted in earlier Bible studies, the way of something is that distinctive impulse or code that governs the character and function of a given part of creation. Here wisdom is identified as the essential factor that governs God’s work as a creator. Wisdom guides God in all God’s creating, from the very beginning. Creating is not an arbitrary act, but determined by wisdom.

Discuss: How do you react to the claim of Wisdom that she is the first thing that God acquired, even before God began creating? Wisdom is not an attribute of God here, but a primal partner with God. Does this seem reasonable to you? Does it seem contrary to the evidence of science? How might you understand it?

Read Proverbs 8.24-29

In these verses Woman Wisdom describes a number of the domains of creation. She claims to have been present prior to their coming into existence. She was there before the great watery deeps appeared, before the mountains took shape,

A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

before the skies had any structure and before foundations of Earth were established.

What is implied by Wisdom's claim that she was present before the creation of these domains? That she saw how they came into being and hence understands their nature? Perhaps! I suggest, however, in the light of related wisdom texts that two specific implications can be identified.

First, wisdom is not only an observer but an agent of God in the creation process. Proverbs 3.19-20 makes it clear that it is 'by wisdom' that God created the cosmos. Wisdom is the partner, power and eternal guide for God in the creation of the world.

Second, since wisdom is a guiding force in creating the domains of the cosmos, evidence of wisdom can be discerned in those domains. To speak of each domain having its own 'way' or inner code that determines its character, is to recognise an expression of primal wisdom in every component of creation, however vast or minute. Wisdom imparts wisdom to all realms of creation so that they function according to an ultimate design for parts of creation.

Discuss: If each component of creation has its inherent way implanted by wisdom, how might we discern that wisdom in things? Are scientists ultimately exploring the endless 'ways' of wisdom inherent in the universe, whether they happen to be the genes or the galaxies of our world?

Read Proverbs 8.30-31

Woman Wisdom closes with a delightful portrait of her relationship with God. She says that she was by God's side all the way through creating the cosmos and that she excited God throughout the creation process. Wisdom is more than clinical artisan at God's side; she is a partner that causes God to rejoice and celebrate in all of creation, including the human race.

This celebration is a two way event. Wisdom turn God on, as it were, through the wonders of creation and she, in turn, rejoices 'before him' continuously. So when

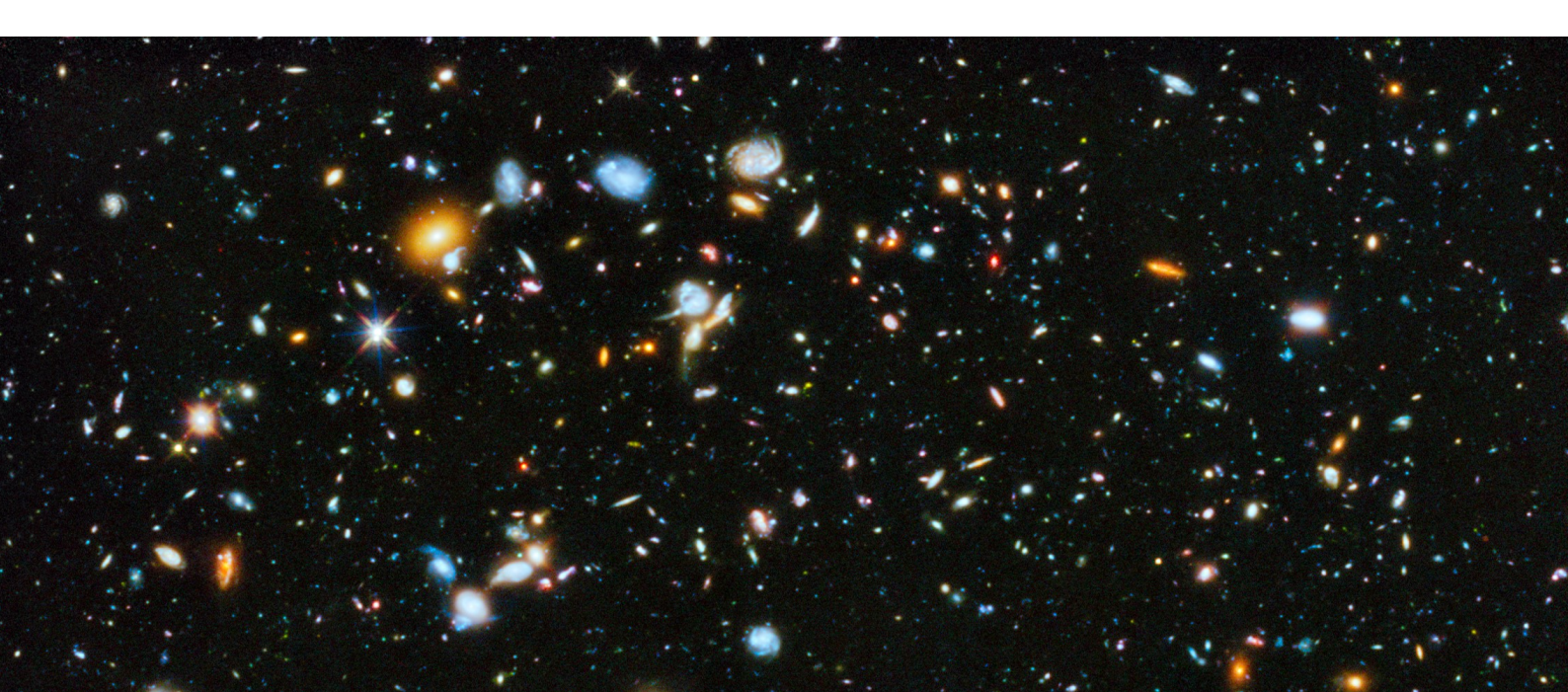
A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

God sees the 'ways' of wisdom in creation, God not only says 'very good' but 'hallelujah!' We too are able to celebrate with creation, with the presence of Wisdom in creation and with a God who rejoices in creation.

One question remains. A key but rare word in verse 30 is debated. Should it be translated 'like a master craftsman' or 'a little child' or 'the faithful one'? Or is this a case of double entendre? The rendering 'craftsman' seems to fit the idea that Wisdom was a designer with God in crafting the cosmos. The translation, 'little child', however, is compatible with the idea that God is excited and celebrates, as one would with an infant that God loves. The concept that wisdom is the 'faithful' partner of God in the continuing task of creating our world also has appeal.

Note how Psalm 148 takes this celebration a step further and invites every domain of the cosmos to praise God, everything from supernova to snowflakes. All the cosmos is invited to join God in shouting 'halleluja!' Why? Because God commanded and they were created (v. 8), or in the image of Proverbs 8, because God created all things through Wisdom, with whom God rejoices daily.

An image of the 'Hubble Ultra-Deep Field', showing remote galaxies each containing billions of stars.



A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

Discuss: How might we reflect the truth that both Wisdom and the Creator rejoice and celebrate the wonders of creation? Where might we discern this rejoicing in the world around us? Have the destructive ways and lifestyles of humans tended to remove us from nature and hence reduced our awareness of a celebrating Creator accompanied by Wisdom?

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

It could be argued that this reading from Proverbs 8 supports the current theory of Intelligent Design which argues that from inexplicable dimensions in the design of the cosmos we can argue for the existence of God as the only possible explanation for such realities.

Proverbs 8 works just the opposite way. It takes for granted a God and a partner who is Wisdom, a dimension even greater than an intelligent design in creation. And the wise person is not concerned with arguing that God exists, but with discovering the wondrous 'ways' of wisdom in every component of the cosmos and the rejoicing presence of the Creator in, with and under those components.

More important than exercising the human mind about the existence of God, is facing the reality of the human will that treats creation as property, domains to be dominated and exploited. We have devalued God's creation and, by our folly we have violated the wisdom inherent in the ways of creation. And that folly extends to almost every domain on planet Earth.

Discuss: Outline ways in which our folly has negated the very wisdom God employed in creating the ecosystems of this planet? Are there ways in which we can return again to explore our planet and discern its ways, the wisdom in our environment that we can acquire once again to help redeem our wounded world?

THE CHRIST CONNECTION

Read Colossians 1.15-20

This reading from Colossians is very dense, intense and profound. Christ is here portrayed as the cosmic power through whom all things visible and invisible were

A BIBLE STUDY FOR COSMOS SUNDAY

created. Christ is the cosmic one who is not only before all things but the one who is the unifying impulse in all creation. In other words, the Wisdom spoken of in Proverbs is here identified with the cosmic Christ, the agent and ordering force in all things. 'All things', by the way, is an ancient Greek expression for the entire cosmos.

What is revealed in this epistle, however, is that the cosmic Christ is not only Wisdom, the primal agent and architect of creation. Christ is also the one who plays another role in the cosmic order.

Christ is that eternal force working now to 'reconcile all things' to God. Where there are forces that have brought alienation to the created order, Christ is the impulse to bring healing and unity. Christ is not only the one who brings healing and reconciliation between humans and God, but between all creation and God. The cross of Jesus Christ is more than an act through which God redeems humans. The cross signals the process of God redeeming all creation. Such a message is truly worth celebrating.

Discuss: If Christ is indeed the force at work in the healing of creation, where might we see that healing happening? Are we as servants of Christ called to work with Christ in healing a wounded and alienated creation? Are the ugly wounds caused by global warming and similar evils also the concern of the cosmic Christ suffering with creation? What are we called to do as Christians who have an awareness of how Christ works in us and our cosmos?

*May the cosmic Christ whose healing presence
fills the universe and works to reconcile all things,
help us to discern the presence of Wisdom in creation,
to celebrate her wondrous impulses
and to discover the ways she reveals
for us to be agents of Christ is healing our planet.*

Amen

Greta Thunberg and the Purposes of God



Greta Thunberg is 16 year-old Swedish climate activist who a year ago began the 'School Strike 4 Climate' by quietly sitting down, alone, with a placard in front of the Swedish Parliament.

The 'Strike' has quickly developed into a global movement protesting climate inaction by governments and trans-governmental agencies. The movement now involves millions of people, many, but not all of them, young people.

Not that long-ago Greta would have been denied validity (and even full personhood) because of three factors: her gender, her age and that she has Asperger's Syndrome. She should have no power or influence;

she does not come from a powerful or wealthy family and has none of the usual, superficial traits the media loves. She may certainly be classed as one of the "last", and yet she has become first in this movement.

Supporters and detractors alike are increasingly framing Greta as a "prophet" for the climate movement and even using messianic language. Greta herself has no publicly identified faith, yet her tenacious actions and commitments are contributing to the radical changes needed to care for God's Creation.

Questions for Reflection

- Does God inspire people without faith to achieve God's purposes?
- Where can we find examples of this in Holy Scripture?
- How should we, as Christians, relate to people and movements who may be achieving God's purposes but who are secular in nature, or even anti-faith? How can we share the Good News in these circumstances?

A COLLECT FOR BLESSINGS ANIMALS

Holy Creator of feathers, fur, scale and skin,
Through your creatures we have been blessed with companionship,
protection, nurture and love;
Show us how to honour the animals that support and accompany us
in our journey through life
so that they may share in your abundance.
Through our Lord and Saviour, your Son Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in unity with the Holy Spirit.
Amen

SARAH STAPLETON



A HYMN FOR BLESSING OF ANIMALS

Sung to the tune of 'Praise my Soul, the King of Heaven' (TIS 134)

1. Mother Earth, our mother birthing
Ev'ry creature from the ground.
Jesus too was flesh and breathing,
Kin to all that's green and brown.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life .
2. Sister Air, our sister lifting
Ev'ry creature born with wing;
Jesus shared the breath of forests,
Breath that makes our spirits sing.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life .
3. Brother Water, brother pulsing
Deep through ev'ry vein and sea,
Jesus drank the very raindrops
For our wine and in our tea.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life .
4. Father Fire, our father burning
With the sacred urge to live.
Jesus' death completes the cycle,
Bringing life beyond the grave.
Celebrate with all creation:
God has joined the web of life

Words: © Norman Habel 1999



A HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS BLESSING OF ANIMALS SERVICE

Dr. John Berkman

It is my pleasure and honour to address you on this beautiful day. It is my first opportunity to speak to such a diverse, beautiful and gifted audience as you are. Of course, you may not understand everything I have to say, but perhaps your human companions and masters can somehow further communicate the few words I want to share.

I have three points. First, I want to tell you why we bless you. Second, I want to remind you that you share the same basic purpose for your lives that we humans have — we are all called to glorify God in our very lives. Third, I want to thank you for ways in which God uses you to reveal God's very self to us.

First, I want to speak about blessing. I speak to you today to say why it is we have come to bless you. I cannot hope to articulate all of the reasons we bless you, but I will try to share with you a few reasons.

We bless you for the same reason we bless ourselves or bless one another, and similarly receive a blessing from our priest or minister or fellow believer.

In receiving a blessing, we humans are being told that we are holy and beloved by God. So too, when you are blessed, you are being told by God that you are holy and loved by God.

So we come to bless you today because you too are beloved creatures of God. The Scriptures we have read this afternoon remind us of that, though I daresay we too often fail to notice how God indeed cares for you. As the Psalmist says, you all are an expression of God's wisdom. Each cat, each dog, each sheep each iguana — each of YOU here has been created by our loving heavenly God, and each of you, whether you are a rabbit, or a sheep or a horse, you reveal something of our Creator in all your being.



A HOMILY FOR A BLESSING OF ANIMALS SERVICE

Second, I want to speak about what you all have in common with each other, and have in common with us human animals. The writer of Ecclesiastes draws of number of parallels between your lives and those of your human masters and companions. Like human animals, God has created you out of the dust, and to dust you will return. The writer of Ecclesiastes seems to think that if human animals can hope for an afterlife so can you. However, perhaps the most important thing that you share with human animals is that you have been created to glorify God in your very being. If you are a cat, you glorify God by your cat-ness, being what God has created you as a cat to be. If you are a dog, you glorify God in your living as a dog. In the same way I, a human animal, glorify God by being the kind of human animal God creates me to be.

I am sorry to say that this is a fundamental truth about who you are that many of my fellow humans — and I am sometimes guilty of this too — fail to realize. Your existence, and that of all your fellow animals, as well as the lives of myself and all other humans, is fundamentally ordered to glorifying God. By living your lives as dogs, or as iguanas, or rabbits, or cats, you glorify God, you give pleasure to your Creator.

So I apologize on behalf of myself and my fellow human beings that all too often, we forget that the ultimate purpose of your lives is not to assist us, to keep us company, to amuse us, or even to feed us. Your lives have their worth in God's love and concern and purposes for you.

I would like to be able to say more about the purposes that God has for you, but they are largely a mystery to me. And besides, it would be incredibly presumptuous of me to think I could say anything insightful about all the diverse ways that each of you, in your daily activities, reveal the glory of God. For example, I confess I can't begin to elaborate the various ways in which Thelma and Louise, the two calico cats with whom I have shared an apartment for six years, glorify God in



A HOMILY FOR A BLESSING OF ANIMALS SERVICE

their feline lives. So much less can I begin to elaborate the purposes of many of your whom I have not even met. While I confess my lack of understanding of your lives, one thing is clear. That your strangeness, your otherness is a great reminder to us humans of the great and marvellous riches of Our shared Creator.

And this brings me to my third point, that we humans thank you and bless you for the ways in which you reveal God to us. You do so in at least two distinct ways.

First of all, we humans often have a particularly difficult time coming to terms with the fact that like you, we are creatures. We humans often have a difficult time accepting who we are. And when we humans question our God, question his designs and purposes, God often helps us understand by pointing towards you all, and saying, in effect to us uncomprehending humans – I’m like this mother hen in this way, I’m like that lamb in that way, I’m like this dolphin in this way, I’m like the pelican in that way.

Sometimes God has to remind us human beings that your relationship with God is beyond our human comprehension, as God tells Job when Job questions God’s ways. God reminds Job of how little we humans know of God’s ways. There God tells you horses that God gives you your might, God tells brother raven that his food comes from God, God tells the sister hawk and brother eagle that their flight is God’s gift to them to use to display God’s majesty.

In response to this, Job can only say, “God, your ways, your doings, your creatures are too wonderful for me.” Job once again rightly stands in awe of the various gifts God has given to each of you. And so we too stand in awe of the various gifts



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God gives to you which have not been bestowed on us humans. You dogs amongst us, you teach us fidelity, as well as what it is to smell well. You birds, you show us simplicity, as well as graceful flight. You horses, you show us gentleness, as well as speed. You cats amongst us, you not only incite us to curiosity, but your sight is an amazing gift.

Secondly, fellow creatures, God uses you to reveal God's very self to us humans. Throughout much of Christian history, the incomprehensible ways of God have been communicated by great artists by looking to some of you. I will give only four examples:

In St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, you dogs personify "fidelity" to us.

You doves, with your qualities of peace, simplicity, patience and purity, symbolize and help the rest of us creatures grasp, if only in a faint way, the holy spirit.

You pelicans, you have personified Our Lord Jesus Christ in one of the most beautiful yet relatively unknown accounts that have been passed down to us. From early Christian times, an ancient story was adopted in which the pelican, in seeing its babies dead, cries aloud with grief and bending over their bodies, tears his breast with his beak so that his blood pours over them. Under this warm shower, very soon the dead baby pelicans begin to stir and come back to life, beating their wings joyfully and burrowing into their father's downy feathers.

From earliest Christian art, this was understood to be a symbol of the relation between God and humans. Like the pelican's young, the human race is dead to the life of the spirit. The Saviour pours his blood over humanity, purifying it by his sacrifice, and gave it back true life. Countless Christian thinkers, including St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante all understood the story of Pelican to be revealing this sacred truth.

But perhaps the creature who has most famously revealed the truth of God to us humans, the most popular symbol for Christ, is the lamb. From the earliest days of Christianity in the catacombs, long before Christians dared to show a cross, the

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lamb was the dominant symbol of Christ. The lamb was the symbol chosen to take its place. It was, we might say, the first crucifix, or the pre-crucifix.

Today, Christ is our Passover lamb. In the Eucharist we eat of the divine lamb. In the book of Revelation, St. John has the believers following in the footsteps of the lamb.

In all of these examples I have only begun to say a little of the gifts you offer to God, and that is of course all I can hope to do. So today we bless you in recognition of your holiness and being loved by God. In doing so we recognize that this world is yours as well as ours, because God has put you here, and that is the only rationale for your existence that you need. Finally, we bless you in recognition that you reveal God to us in ways we only begin to comprehend, and remind us in sometimes difficult and painful ways that we are not at the centre of the universe. Like you, we are God's creatures. Thank you and God bless you.

BLESSING PRAYER

Most high, almighty Lord, our Creator, yours are the praise, the glory, the honour and all blessings! To you alone do all things belong. Be praised for giving us the animals, birds and fish which fill your world. May we think of you and thank you when we play with and care for our pets. Be praised for making us so happy to have our pets and to have them to play with. We ask you, Lord, that we may be good to our pets always, so that they may be happy also. Help us always to take care of them so that they will be healthy. O God, your world is wonderful. May we all come into your even greater world of the kingdom of heaven where we shall see even more wonderful things and where we shall live and love for ever. This we ask to your eternal praise, and to our blessing. Amen.



*“But ask the animals,
and they will teach you;
the birds of the air,
and they will tell you .”*

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