

Partnering in Praise

In January of 1968, jazz musician Duke Ellington and his orchestra performed a sacred concert at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. It was one of three sacred concerts he undertook to write, later indicating that he wrote the music for these concerts not as a matter of career, but in response to a greater understanding of his own vocation.

His second sacred concert culminates in an eleven-minute finale entitled *Praise God and Dance*. It is based on the final psalm in our psalter, Psalm 150. Soprano soloist Alice Babbs starts out lofty and lyrical, singing "Praise God with the sound of the trumpet." And the trumpet answers. "Praise God with the harp." And the harp strums its way in. "Praise God with the sound of the timbrel." And the percussion starts up.

It goes on from there as the psalm does, praising God with the stringed instruments, the organ, the cymbal. "Let everything that breathes praise God," the soloist encourages. Next comes a long and joyous jazz instrumental interlude, and then multiple singers come in together with the lines, "Praise God and dance. Dance. Dance. Dance." On and on it goes, building and building until it nearly explodes, and at the end of eleven minutes the music ends and the concert ends.

The concert was well-received when it was first performed in New York, and then well-received all over the country, and then in Europe, too. But in no place was it more enthusiastically received than in Barcelona, Spain, in the ancient church of Santa Maria del Mar. When the musicians played their finale there, and the soloists started chanting, "Dance. Dance. Praise God and dance," suddenly the congregation jumped up, leapt into the aisles and danced. They couldn't seem to help it. They could not restrain their enthusiasm. They had to respond. The message of the psalm and the music transcended language barriers, so when the invitation came, "Praise God and dance," they got up and did it.

Ever since I heard a recording of that concert, I have not been able to read Psalm 150 without hearing that sweet trumpet, and those drums, and that soprano. And without imagining a bunch of people dancing in the aisles of an ancient church. "Let everything that has breath praise God and dance." It is one of the most exuberant psalms there is. And it is a fitting final note to the whole psalter. The psalm doesn't just sit there on the page; it invites response; it demands the response of everything that breathes.

Our psalm this morning goes even further. Whereas Psalm 150 invites everything that breathes to praise the Lord, Psalm 148 invites everything that is. "Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise him, all his angels. Praise him, sun and moon. Praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the heavens. Praise the Lord from the Earth you sea-monsters and all deeps. Fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command; mountains and all hills. Fruit trees and all cedars. Wild animals and all cattle. Creeping things and flying birds. Praise the Lord."

And after speaking this invitation to all of these created things, both those that breathe and those that do not, only then does the psalmist get to people. "Kings of the earth and all peoples, you too. Young men and women alike; old and young together. Let everyone praise the name of the Lord."

This psalm is as comprehensive as they come. It is radically inclusive. And it does not just speak of all these parts of God's creation; it speaks to them – which is a bit odd. I mean, it's one thing to speak to your pets, who sometimes seem to understand, but to talk to plants and stars and creeping things on the ground as the psalmist does – it seems a bit out there.

St. Francis of Assisi famously engaged in this sort of behavior. He preached to fields of flowers, and exhorted them to praise God. He did the same thing with whatever he encountered – corn fields, vineyards, springs of water, plants. He encouraged all of them to praise and love God their Creator. And he spoke to them as if they could understand.

For Francis, God's household includes not just human beings but all of creation. And the most vulnerable parts of creation, he said, revealed to him especially the face of the beautiful and vulnerable Christ.

Episcopal priest and professor Barbara Brown Taylor writes of having conversations with creation, as an exercise in pronouncing blessings, which she understands to be an important spiritual practice. To help her students with this, she had a group of them go outside and read a poem to a tree. They were skeptical, to say the least. But afterwards she had some converts. "Poetry is just not my thing," one of them said to her. "But when I read one of these poems to a tree like you said, it sounded different to me. It's like the words had an inside and an outside, and I had only read the outside. Reading them to the tree, I heard the inside. The words were so beautiful I almost cried."

Another one said to her, "I felt completely stupid, standing there in the quadrangle reading to a tree. But after a couple of lines, I realized that the tree was really liking it. I am going to try to read to a bird next."

Taylor and St. Francis both seem to understand something that the psalmist knows too – that when we take God's creation seriously, as a partner, as a part of our family, we might be stretched beyond the boundaries of what is accepted as rational and sane. But what they are calling us to involves a way of seeing, really seeing, the handiwork, of God, and respecting it, and relating to God through it.

Perhaps you've had an experience like this. Maybe you've talked to a plant. Or maybe you've gazed into the eyes of your dog, with amazement both at the connection you found there and at the absolute otherness from you; the particularity in this created being – created and loved by the same God that creates and loves you. Maybe you've stood at the edge of a canyon, or an ocean, or a mountaintop and felt something like wonder and something like embrace. If you've never felt that sort of kinship and awe in the face of God's creation, maybe it's time to read a poem to a tree, or talk to a flower, or whisper to the wind.

Fifteenth century reformer Martin Luther once said, "God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also in trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars."

Friends, what I hope you will take from today's service, not just from the sermon but from thy hymns and the anthems and the prayers and the liturgy is that the created order really does belong to God. It does not belong to us as individuals, or as nations, as corporations, or as a species. It is not ours to use and abuse as we please.

I'd like to close with a prayer that comes to us from the fourth century. It was originally prayed by St. Basil the Great.

Let us bow our heads and make his prayer our prayer:

"O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals [and all creatures] to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of humans with ruthless cruelty; so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to Thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that all creatures live not for us alone but for themselves and for Thee, and that they love the sweetness of life."

Amen.