

SERMON: In the Chorus of Creation

June 14, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Almighty God, whose praise is sung throughout creation, open wide our imagination so that through the reading and preaching of your word, we may take our place in the great chorus of creation, giving voice to the praise for which all things were created; through Christ, the Lamb upon the throne of the universe. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 148

N.T. Lesson: Revelation 4:6b-11, 5:11-14

A number of years ago Susan and I attended a performance by the Greenville Symphony Orchestra of what I think may have been “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” I can’t remember what the piece was, because as stunning as the musical performance was, what really caught my attention was the way in which it was conducted by Edvard Tchivzhel. If you have even seen him conduct, you know that he literally throws himself into the music—almost dancing the score. In this particular performance, he was a whirlwind of activity, reaching out to each section of the orchestra to draw out the music from them at the appropriate time, taking delight in every note.

That’s the image that comes into my mind when I hear the psalm that we read together this morning--that of the Lord God conducting the symphony of creation in similar fashion—standing on the podium of eternity, calling forth praise from every instrument of creation, taking delight in every note of every creature, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.

Psalm 148 invites us to envision the whole creation as a great symphony of praise with God as the Master Conductor. It is with that image that the whole Psalter moves to its grand finale in a series of five psalms of praise, each of which begins with the word *Hallelujah*, Praise the Lord!

It is appropriate that the psalms of Israel should end with a crescendo of praise in which “everything that breathes” is called to praise the Lord! The whole symphony of biblical faith moves from the opening clash of cymbals as God declares, “Let there be!” to a majestic chorus of praise that resounds throughout the new creation. From beginning to end the Bible insists that the universe God created out of overflowing love does not end with “a bang or a whimper,” but with a glorious doxology in which “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” sings praise “to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb.” We are invited, indeed commanded, to join our voices in that universal chorus that ceaselessly offers the praise for which all things were created to “glorify and enjoy God forever.”

Scripture invites us to view the worship we offer each Sunday as a rehearsal for the final symphony of praise in which someday we will take our place. In his great hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” Charles Wesley gave voice to the promised future toward which our worship points.

“Finish, then, Thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise.”¹

¹ Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” *Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 376.

That is the hope we rehearse every Lord's Day. Each week here in this sanctuary we practice "the scales of rejoicing"² in preparation for taking our place in the choir of God's new creation. That being the case, I think we have to confess that we have a long way to go in order to make what we call "worship" a more appropriate rehearsal for the future into which God is calling us. The challenge is to find an appropriate balance between the kind of praise that is little more than frivolity and the overly solemn reverence that drains the joy out of worship. It is not an easy balance to strike, especially for people like us, raised in an entertainment culture like ours.

That is why it is so important, so vital, for our worship to be guided by Scripture itself, especially by the psalms of Israel, "the hymnbook of humanity." Over the centuries the psalms have served as our best guide to the praise we are to render unto God. The psalm we performed this morning—Psalm 148—serves that purpose particularly well.

The psalm consists primarily of a series of imperatives, commands to praise and keep on praising God. But look who is called to praise God, and look who has been doing so long before you or I came on the scene--the whole of creation itself.

The psalmist imagines the Conductor of Creation turning first to the stars in the heavens and calling forth their wordless praise.

**"Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! ...
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!"**

In the psalmist's day, in an arid climate, the night sky would be strewn with stars, calling forth awe and wonder. For many of us the stars in the heavens still have that same effect. Even though we may not see them quite as clearly, still in them we, too, catch a glimpse of the glory of their creator and are moved to praise and wonder.

From as far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated by stars at night. As I was thinking about this sermon, wonderful memories came flooding back of walks our family would take at night on the beach at Garden City when I was a child. My father would name the various constellations in the sky and would often sing,

"Evening star up yonder, Teach me like you to wander,
Willing and obediently, the path that thou ordained for me.
Evening star up yonder."

In more recent years, thanks to the majestic images of galaxies in the far reaches of the universe sent by the Hubble Telescope, we have been given a glimpse of the grandeur of creation beyond even that of the psalmist. Every time I look at those images, I am filled with awe and wonder. What an incredible universe in which we live! Strange and wondrous beyond all imagining.

In inspired poetry the psalmist depicts the Creator calling forth praise from sun and moon and stars, but how? How *do* they offer their praise? They praise God simply by being what God in infinite wisdom, power, and love created them to be. "He established them forever and ever," says the psalmist, "God fixed their bounds which cannot be passed." It may take a good deal of imagination to think of stars praising God, but scientists have now detected rhythmic pulsations at the center of stars that, when sped up a million times, sound like the base section of creation itself—"the music of the spheres."

² Phrase from W. H. Auden's *For the Time Being*

First, the Master Conductor of the symphony of the universe turns to the stars in the heavens and calls forth their praise. Then the Conductor turns to this lovely blue marble of a planet on the edge of the Milky Way galaxy and calls forth praise from the woodwinds of sea and land. “Praise the Lord, . . . you sea monsters and all deeps,
 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy will fulfilling his command!
 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
 Wild animals and all cattle,
 creeping things (snakes), and flying birds.”

What does their praise sound like? Again, use your imagination. The Bishop of the Church of South India Lesslie Newbigin tells of the nights he spent in the jungles of India. Away from the noise of cities, nights in the jungle were filled with sounds--the roar of lions, the shrieks of jackals, the jabbering of monkeys. “Who hears all these things, there in the jungles of India, night after night?” Newbigin asks. God does, and God takes delight in the wordless praise of all creatures “great and small.”

The biologist Lewis Thomas in his book *The Lives of a Cell* attunes his ears to what he calls “The Music of THIS Sphere.” “Termites,” he says, “make percussive sounds to each other by beating their heads against the floor in the dark, resonating corridors of their nests.” An analysis of the sound reveals what he calls “a high degree of organization in the drumming; the beats occur in regular, rhythmic phrases, differing in duration, like notes for a tympani section.” And fish make sounds by clicking their teeth, blowing air, or drumming with their air bladders. The croaker our granddaughter caught on the dock at Litchfield lived up to his name as he croaked his gratitude for being released. And dolphins chatter in their own special language which we are just beginning to decode. And whales sing their plaintive songs in the depths of the sea. And “the thrush in my backyard,” says Thomas, “sings down his nose in meditative, liquid runs of melody, over and over again, and I have the strongest impression that he does this for his own pleasure.” Thomas says, “If we had better hearing and could discern the descants of sea birds, the rhythmic timpani of schools of mollusks, or even the distant harmonics of midges hanging over the meadows in the sun, the combined sound might lift us off our feet.”³ Or it might drive us to our knees, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Having called forth praise from the stars in the heavens and the creatures of the earth, the Master Conductor now turns to the brass section of humanity. Praise him, “**Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together.**” No one, however great or lowly, however privileged or impoverished, no one however young or old, is left out of the symphony of praise. There is a place for those who play the finest Stradivarius and those who have nothing but a broom stick and the lid of a trash can to bang on in the wonderful democracy of praise.

All we need to take our place in the choir of creation is a sense of wonder and gratitude. And all we need to cultivate that sense of wonder and gratitude is to open wide our hearts and minds to the gifts of life in God’s wondrous creation—gifts as simple as the beauty of a sunrise over the ocean, the sounds of waves rolling on the shore, the taste of fresh shrimp, the smell of redfish broiling in the oven, the sound of children’s laughter as they chase each other down the beach. Look with more than just your eyes, listen with more than just your ears, feel with more than just your emotions. . . and praise will come as naturally as breathing. Thank you, thank you, thank you, O God. . . for the wondrous gift of life in your awesome, majestic creation.

³ Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) pp. 22-28.

Now granted, none of us comes anywhere close to taking in all the wonder of the world around us. At best we only catch glimpses of the glory of God lighting up the darkness like fireflies on a summer evening. We hear only an octave or two of the notes in the symphony of creation. But God sees and hears it all, and takes delight in it all! If you and I were to open our ears and our eyes and our minds and our souls a bit more widely to what Lewis Thomas calls “the music of This sphere,” we, too, would be moved to “a more profound Alleluia!”⁴

As far as we know, we are the only creature in all the universe gifted with words to voice creation’s praise. That makes us stewards of the wonder of life. It is our vocation to join our voices with all that God has made in the great chorus of creation. As the hymn we shall sing at the end of the service puts it,

“We, too, should be voicing Our love and rejoicing
With glad adoration, a song let us raise;
Till all things now living Unite in thanksgiving,
To God in the highest, hosanna and praise.”⁵

The psalmist invites and commands, **“Let us praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; God’s glory is above earth and heaven. God has raised up a horn of salvation for his people, praise for his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.”** The God who is beyond our imagining, whose glory fills all creation, who sets the stars in their orbits and calls each of them by name, has freely and from all eternity chosen to draw near to us...in the life of his covenant people Israel and most of all in his Beloved Son Jesus, the Lamb upon the throne. He has given each of us an “instrument tuned for praise,”⁶ and a score to perform in the symphony of creation.

And he has promised that in the fullness of time, in the glory of God’s new creation, we will find ourselves surrounded by a countless host of creatures, some as unimaginable as any in a *Star Wars* movie, joined with us in praise to our Creator and Redeemer, singing as in one voice, **“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”** Imagine that! Imagine that, if you can.

It’s not easy to imagine. It stretches out minds and our souls. That’s what biblical praise does—it stretches us. It lifts us out of ourselves, and it sets us in a great community of praise as wide as creation itself. It helps me to remember that even when our praise falls silent, other parts of the cosmic chorus carry the melody for us. When we can barely croak out a note of praise, bullfrogs’ sing base and tree frogs sing tenor. When we can barely drag ourselves out of bed on a Sunday morning, robins and cardinals sing the “Gloria Patri.” And while we sleep at night, whales sing and lions roar, and the steady pulsation of stars in the far reaches of the universe keep the music going, as even now the whole chorus of creation waits “with eager longing” for us to take our place in the symphony of praise that God is conducting. “Praise the Lord” Hallelujah! Amen.

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⁴ Phrase from Fred Pratt Green’s “When in Our Music God Is Glorified,” *Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 264.

⁵ “Let All Things Now Living,” *Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 554.

⁶ Also from Fred Pratt Green’s “When in Our Music God Is Glorified,” *Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 264.