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“Awakening to Creation”
A sermon by Ronald Cole-Turner

First Sunday in Lent (Year B)
February 22, 2013
Psalm 104:1–3, 14-33; Mark 1:9–15

The radiance of divine light shines through the entire creation.

My hope and prayer for you—indeed, if I could offer a blessing here today to each one of you—would be that you come to the fullest possible awakening to the beauty, the joy, the stunning superabundance of love that surrounds you in this created arena of God’s glory.

O that we could see nature as a robe that shimmers when God passes by, dancing and rejoicing. The Psalmist could see it. Just imagine thinking: The sky—it’s God’s tent. Every creature has its home, every gift its purpose, bread for strength and wine to gladden the heart. And all the light that bathes the earth: that’s God’s dazzling robe.

Of course at the literal level, this text is naïve, even laughable. It can’t be taken literally. Sunlight is not God’s robe. Every fourth grader knows that sunlight is the energy released from hydrogen fusion. Psalm 104 is so childish, so concrete, so obviously not meant to be taken literally that we have no choice but to take it seriously.

It’s poetry, and for some of you it may call to mind the opening phrases of Dante’s *Paradiso*. Dante writes: “The glory of the One who moves all things penetrates and glows throughout the universe.” For Dante, things are what they are. And yet they are more because of what they contain. Everything contains the glory of God.

Glory penetrates all things, suffuses, permeates... what's the right word here... indwells. It's like looking at a great stained glass window when the sunlight fills it from behind, setting it ablaze. When we are truly awakened to creation, we see it ablaze, aglow, energized and dazzling with divine presence. We don't really have a good word here to say what must be said. Creation is not God, but God is in all creation, permeating and indwelling.

Not so sure about Dante? Too Catholic? Then let's go with John Calvin: "For it is the Spirit who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and on earth... transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life and movement..." (*Institutes* 1.13.14).

What I like here is that Calvin is being a good Trinitarian theologian. It's not just God we're talking about, as if God is over there and we're over here all alone. The triune God is the engaged God. In Christ Jesus, God is there and here, other than and yet one with creation, in a creature, in a babe in a manger, in a particular, defined, and once and for all way. In the Holy Spirit, the same God is everywhere present, in a universal way, everywhere diffused, as Calvin puts it, transfusing into all things God's own energy.

Moments ago we read in our Gospel lesson for today about the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan, followed by the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit, and voice declaring Jesus as God's own beloved. And then immediately, Mark says, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days, and there he went face to face with Satan, and wild beasts, and angels. There he goes into the wilderness, exposed, vulnerable, the protections of civilized life are gone, and suddenly it is one-on-one, for Jesus and I think for us as well. The forty days in the wilderness provide the foundation for the forty days of Lent, which began just a few days ago.

Of course, Presbyterians have never been too comfortable with Lent. Giving things up for Lent might strike us as works righteousness, and well it should. It is an opportunity for reflection and growth, for new levels of honesty about the darkness and emptiness we often feel. The problem is not simply our own inner struggles and all the dark and lonely moments we experience within. It's that, of course, but

it's compounded by the fact that we have been taught to see nature as a machine, mere matter in motion, emptied not just of all the little spirits and elves and leprechauns that once hid in the wild places, emptied not just of demons and wild beasts and angels that Jesus met out where it's wild, but emptied of the presence of the living God. Forget Dante; forget even Calvin. For us God is not here but far away if anywhere at all, out there somewhere, who knows where, and we are over here, and we are lonely, spiritually lonely.

To be modern is to live in a vast and empty universe. With Blaise Pascal we say: the silence of these empty spaces terrifies me. We pull back from the infinite void around us and turn inward, hoping to protect a little zone of spiritual life within, a quiet place where we try to connect with God, and at times we do, but then we get up and go back to reality.

There really are no spirits or elves or leprechauns to talk to any more. Forests aren't haunted. True: we no longer think of the universe as just dead matter circling through empty space. That's all so 19th century, today's physicists will tell us. But the more our universe comes alive with energy and wonder, the less we need God to explain it. You recall what Steven Weinberg said: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless." Or as Carl Sagan writes in his Introduction to Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*: "This is a book about God... or perhaps about the absence of God... Hawking is attempting... to understand the mind of God. And this makes all the more unexpected the conclusion of the effort, as least so far: a universe with no edge in space, no beginning or end in time, and nothing for a Creator to do."

In nature there's nothing left for God to do... and so it's not surprising that we turn inward, away from nature and into the quiet spaces of our interior lives, hoping to connect with God there because we have given up hope of connecting elsewhere. Well, there's the Eucharist. We say that Christ is present in bread and wine, as if these tiny bits of nature were the only place God is present, the only bits of nature full of the real presence of God. And in that way we turn the Eucharistic presence into a bizarre and perverted spectacle to point out God's absence, as if God were present here but nowhere else.

Oh, that the vision and the passion of Psalm 104 would thunder down upon us and overwhelm our sensibilities. God is everywhere present. Christ unites the whole creation to God. The Holy Spirit is God everywhere, permeating, penetrating, suffusing, saturating, making alive, making holy. We live in a God-saturated world. We simply need to wake up to that truth. God is everywhere. It's not that God is needed to keep creation moving. It is rather that God is everywhere delighting in how creation moves on its own.

One of the more tender themes in Psalm 104 is that everything has a purpose. The moon's purpose is to mark the seasons. The whale's purpose: to play in the ocean. Olive oil? To make the face shine. Even wine: to gladden the human heart. Not too much gladdening, mind you. I grew up being told to skip this verse. It was there for the Episcopalians, in case they ever read the Bible.

But God is good, and God leads us children on. Yes, wine to gladden the heart. Whales to splash in the waves for the same reason that toddlers splash in the bathtub—because it's wet, because it's fun, who cares, who has to have a reason... for nothing more and nothing less than to delight in the superabundance of divine joy, or—dare we say—to put a smile on God's face.

Everything has its place. Everything has its use. And part of the delight in being human is that we can figure things out and invent new uses. I don't think God is put off by technology. I think God likes engineers. Someday I will ask just to make sure. Someday I'll ask my grandpa, a devoted servant of his precious savior, whether any member of the angelic choir has ever made him feel less a saint because he was an electrical engineer or because he made elevators glide gently to the top floors and safely back down again.

Years ago I worked among engineering students at Michigan Tech. For those who don't know, it's way up there in the Scandinavian part of Michigan. I loved the students and the way they saw the world, like it's one big problem set. They liked to refer to the Sunday bulletin as the flow chart. Lord knows we need more practical Christians like that. The challenge is for our engineering to be spiritually inspired, synched up with God's purposes in creating.

But isn't it true? We live in a brilliantly engineered safe space, a bubble of pure artificiality, home to car to classroom or office, seat-buckled, air-bagged, zip-locked, protected. Don't you ever just want to break out? Your baptism is your license, and Lent is your time. "And immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness."

Will you meet demons out there? God will strengthen you. Will you see a few wild beasts? If you're lucky. Will angels wait on you? Pray they will. Will you find yourself in the presence of God? If God has anything to do with it, you will.

As much as you can, let yourself get out there. Connect with nature. Connect with God. Connect with yourself.

In Celtic Christianity, people often speak of the "thin places," those special places where even those of us who are spiritually insensitive can sense something special, a presence we cannot name, a thinning of the membrane between the everyday world and the world beyond. What makes a place a thick place? I suspect the thickness is in us, not in nature. Go out. Connect. Let the thickness melt.

John Muir once wrote: "I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."

You needn't walk in Yosemite Valley to connect. Sometimes all it takes is a single snowflake or the first flower, or watching a spider create a web, or watching buds burst before your eyes. Any single insect is worth a life-time of study. I remember my high school biology bug collection assignment. If you wanted to get an A you had to have fifty different bugs. So I went to the back porch, unscrewed the light cover, and dumped the contents into my box, sorted the poor fried creatures for few minutes, and got my A. That's not quite what I have in mind here.

This is better: Some months ago I walked alone along the Pacific coast, far beyond cars and crowds, on that narrow strip between high cliffs and cold waves, sometimes so narrow that I would have to time the run from point to point when the wave was out. The cliffs were full of life, birds, plants, bright flowers in clumps that burst from little openings in the rock, perfect bouquets of purple or

yellow blooms. And to the west about a mile out, whales, first one, then another and another, spouting, plunging, playing, Leviathan, which Thou didst form to sport in the sea, splashing not for me or for anyone else but for the sheer delight of making the water fly up and God rejoice. May the glory of the Lord endure forever, may the Lord rejoice in his works...” And as I watched, as I lost myself in the scene, I sensed God’s rejoicing, and I sensed a different kind of joy, something different from what I feel in church.

Go out. Connect. Look for what Charles Darwin described when he spoke of “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful...” Nature is full of forms, beautiful and wonderful, that witness to the presence of God, just below the surface, just on the other side of what you can see, so thin the separation, so close at times you can almost touch it, so glorious you are almost afraid it will touch you.

Go out. God will meet you there. God has a date with you. Show up. God will. Delight in nature until you know that your joy gives God even greater delight.

NOTE: The sermon ended with a reading of the poem, “Postscript,” by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, a work protected by copyright.

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