

DRAFT TEXT

Singing God's Creation: Psalms, Hymns, Earth

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Perhaps we can begin with a sung question: "What language shall we borrow to thank thee..." Of course, that question arises out of contrition and mourning. But precisely because of that, it might be the best way to speak of a basic tension in our topic. How shall we sing doxology for all creation and with all creation? How can we *live doxologically* without recognizing the lamentability of the world that comingles with praise?

If we are to make a case for how the language of Scripture can still make sense of the world—its beauty and its terror—it is crucial to start with images that form basic human modes of being and perceiving. Can we express Praise without self-aggrandizement; deep thanksgiving without truthfulness? In other words, I want to pay attention to the *tensive character of doxology and lament*. Making sense of the created order and of our human participation will require, if truthful, forms of discourse that touch down in the beauty and the terror, the praiseworthy and the lamentable of the earth.

C.S. Lewis speaks of how he first thought that God didn't need all that praise that religious people feel it is their obligation to offer. Lewis thought: "God is not a praise monger." But then he came to his senses. "lovers praise their beloved," "patriots praise their homeland of origin," "poets are always praising beauty." Thus, he concluded that praise is not a duty so much as a completion of gratitude and of life itself. In other words, praise is what completes our desire to be fully alive in this world. To which we add: Whoever does not learn to praise does not perceive the world fully as a created order.

At the same time, lovers lament their lost lovers; patriots lament when tyrants despoil their nation, and poets tell us truthfully of desolations and of mortality—the ancient song of love and death... And this is the very language of Scripture itself.

It has been written that at creation the "morning stars sang together", and that at the end of all things, all creation will join in the song of praise. So, the Book of Revelation: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing...blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" Creation is sung into being, and the fulfillment of creation releases the song of creation itself. (My daughter once asked me "what's myriads of myriads?" to which I began a complicated explanation. She simply said, "Oh, EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE.")

Our problem, of course, is that the language of Zion so easily is a cliché and may actually hide or cover over the deeper truth from us, dulling our perception, and dimming the mind, diminishing the stunning height and depth and breadth of what it is to be fully alive in creation. And, for increasing number of people (both within and outside the churches) the language of Zion is both ghettoized and overwhelmed by multiple discourses. Appealing to the languages of Scripture and tradition to explain and clarify our common humanity is increasingly problematic. "Who reads those outdated and irrelevant texts anymore?"

What is to be done? Only by a recovery of the poetry of earth can we hope to find the power of the language of Zion. I contend that Scriptural language, rightly understood and sung, is indeed the primordial poetry of earth. Explore with me some examples in hymns, psalms, and the "liturgy of the created order" – in light of the tensive relationships between doxology and lament.

First some poetic reminders:

Mary Oliver. "The Sun".

Have you ever seen
Anything
In your life
More wonderful
Than the way the sun,
Every evening,
Relaxed and easy,
Floats toward the horizon

And into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone—
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you ever felt for anything

such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language?
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure

that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed—
or have you too
turned from this world—

or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?

Could that have been written without Psalm 19 lingering somewhat in the mind, in the back story of Mary Oliver? “The heavens are telling the glory of God...In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun...”. At the same time, the concluding question reveals a condition for understanding: a disposition

of wonder, of receptivity. That is not compatible with greed, power, or cynical dismissal of the necessary naïveté. (Footnote: albeit it a “second naïveté”. [As Paul Riceour would have it.]

Or from a very different source, Howard Thurman’s “How Wonderful!”
How wonderful it is to be able to feel things deeply!

The sheer delight of fresh air when you have been indoors all day;

The never-ending wonder of sunrise and sunset;

The sound of wind through the trees and the utter wetness of the rain. ...

The invasion of the mind and heart with a sense of Presence in which all of one’s being suddenly becomes God’s dwelling place.

Again, without Psalm 8 or Psalm 90. Yet there is the attunement of images and that interanimates an attitude toward the holy and our quotidian experience of the human senses. Without the poetry of earth (the cosmos) the Scripture can and will remain parochial; without the Scripture’s language the poetry will lack its own archeology and telos.

But the essential element is the condition for perception: wonderment, awe, how language interrogates experience and experience asks our language to condense and stretch and evoke.

Yet another poet comes to mind whose wrestling with the limits of language also sets the conditions for perceiving the world as a “created order” as saturated with the divine. This is Gerard Manley Hopkins. Listen to “God’s Grandeur”.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;’

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.

This is ecstatic praise, but tempered with a tone of lament of the human treading on nature. The beauty and vitality of creation is “seared with trade; smeared with toil. Even the soil is bare; human beings have lost contact with the grandeur of things and do not recognize the rule and reign of God. Despite the lamentable, and precisely because of the contrast, the “dearest freshness” of the divine energies in nature are not extinguished. Thus, Hopkins evokes the way in which the very Holy Spirit of God makes us come to our senses about all of nature. The deep well-spring of life is beyond our explanation yet is the deepest “inscape” and “instress” of all things.

Thus, creation waits for poets to sing it. It is as if God’s life-given hiddenness I creation awaits heightened language to bring us to recognition. As Hopkins writes in “Hurraing in Harvest”:

These things, these things were here and but the beholder

Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Could we say then, the poetry of Scripture in Psalms and hymns as well, is like the “beauty which are here, and but the beholder wanting, which two when they once meet, The heart rears wings...and hurls earth off from under our feet. That is the sense and sensibility of praise.

It remains for us to examine the great ending of the Psalter itself, which I take to be a musical composition: A cantata of praise, that contains within itself tunes of the lamentable, and admonitions of human responsibility for justice.....

PSALMS

None of us who provide prayer and music for church or synagogue can ignore the Psalms. Whether hymns, canticles, or the language of liturgy itself, the Psalms are indispensable. And these are closely related to prophetic passages, perhaps especially in the Isaiahhs.

Think of how the language of Psalm 8 or of 104 give us a way of imaging the world. The whole Psalter ends with breathless praise of God; or shall we say, ends with praise that breathes life into everything. Psalms 146-150 sound an extended concluding doxology—like a five-part cantata. Often called the “Little Hallel,” these five psalms are woven together by the distinctive “Hallelu-Ya” that begins and ends each one. The cry of praise is heard ten times, brought to a climax by ten imperative calls to praise in Psalm 150: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.” This little cantata summons human beings to take part in the greater choir of all living creatures. No wonder Psalm 150 is appointed in the Christian lectionary for the Easter season.

Beginning with a voice calling the soul to praise in Psalm 146, the cantata sounds out the divine presence in nature, the whole cosmos, and in the people of Israel as leading the song to God. Psalm 147 continues the call, especially to Zion, the whole people of God: “Praise your God, O Zion.” (147:12) Psalm 148 intensifies this rhythm, invoking Israel’s praise, followed by Psalm 149 in which Israel’s praise is itself to be an instrument of transformation of the whole world. The world as it is will be seen and heard and touched as the realm and reign of God. Here is the very heart of the poetry of eschatological hope. Psalm 150 thus draws all praise together in a prayer that also proclaims a creation fulfilled. It is a Spirit-filled song in solidarity with all who dwell on earth. This five-part cantata of praise places Psalm 148 in the center, surrounded closely linked on either side by (Psalms 147 and 149). The outer movements (Psalm 146 and 150) ring out the glory and joy of the divine sovereignty. All nature rings in Psalm 148; all social and political life converge with the cosmic song with God at the center.

But there is much more: such praise as this asks something of those who sing and pray. The psalmists’ eschatological song of hope is also a vision of justice, presenting a theology oriented toward the poor. Singing such praise asks that we who sing take up works of mercy and justice. The poor of Israel and thus the poor and suffering of the world are part of our song. These psalms will not allow indifference to the plight of all to whom the merciful care of God is directed. Rightly read and prayed, these psalms are an ultimate critique of the human tendency to regard praise in worship as separate from the call to justice and reconciliation.

To “sing” this cantata fully commands that liturgy and ethics are one in the praise of God. The cup of cold water given, the dance of a child, feeding the hungry and comforting the sorrowful – all these in turn are taken up as praise. Such acts of mercy are all non-verbal forms of praise. All this suggests musical possibilities to expand or to improvise on the little cantata. I can imagine the use of hymns

based on these psalms as a conclusion of a hymn festival. More ambitiously, a through-composed composition using psalm paraphrases might emerge as a concert choral piece.

In any event, to sing and pray these concluding psalms brings forward what is found in the great rhythmic movement of the whole Psalter—from lament to doxology, from struggle to praise. This is the music of the rhythms of life itself, whether in our individual journeys or in the history of our communities. Yes, the psalms are indispensable to spiritual discernment of the relationship between God and man, as Rabbi Heschel has so eloquently written in his books, Man's Search for God, and God's Search for Man. Thus, I invite us to study and sing this remarkable little cantata that concludes the Psalter. And, as is the case with so much Scripture, the Holy One of all creation waits for us to take up the song. Yes, take up the song even in the midst of difficulty and suffering

We will, on Thursday evening, sing our way into the truth. There “All Creatures will hymn the created order. There the language of Scripture will be reconfigured as song, so this lecture will not be complete until we sing with all the creatures in heaven and earth. For Scripture itself remains profoundly mute until we sing and pray it in the vocative. We understand finally by addressing God with the very language that has been given to us over time in Holy Writ.

TWO EXAMPLES of the LANGUAGE THE SINGS WORSHIP

The search for “earthy” and “human” prayer forms.....

A litany of Praise for Creation. (based on Genesis 1). See Gail Ramshaw, Pray, Praise and Give Thanks (Augsburg, 2017), 12-13.

Glory to you, O God: you speak a word of power and so you create the world. We praise you, O God.

We praise you, O God.

For the cosmos beyond our earth, for the sky above our heads, and for the cycle of evening and morning, we exalt you, O God: **We exalt you, God.**

....make us worthy of your marvelous creation. **We praise you, O God.**

Here we notice how the narrative of the first Creation Story provides both the images and the pattern for a liturgical prayer. If we are thinking of worship in a local congregation, we can also imagine visual images created by the children, or by an active ecological group, or a procession to activity space....

Second example is Gail's Litany of Sorrows and Sins.

Again, notice the specific references and allusions to biblical characters and narratives. Lamenting Damage to the Earth (p.24) “O God, is all this devastation our fault? We want always more and to get more, humans have damaged the earth”..... Kyrie.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

This is what the churches are summoned to do: To listen, so to speak, so to live that the social and physical worlds we inhabit will sense and know the glory of God. Gather the obscured and cliched language of Zion together with the poets and with the travail and beauty of the earth. Gather these in a passion for a renewed earth and for a re-vivified humanity. What language shall we borrow? How shall we live in the gap between the is of our world and the ought-to-be of the divine promises for creation?

With these few remarks I propose three pathways: 1) Search for the poets and musicians who are deeply grounded in biblical imagination; 2) Develop ways to think with the primary rhythms of doxology/lament about human responsibility for creation; and 3) reinvest the whole range of liturgical actions with attentiveness to earth, air, fire and water—to the terror and the beauty of life before God.