

Songs of Creation

Genesis 1:26-30

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I heard something really quite remarkable on NPR the other day - snippets of a new album released by Stewart Copeland, a Grammy winning composer and the former drummer for the band, “The Police”. The album is called “Wild Concerto” and consists of twelve tracks which are unlike anything you have ever heard before. Copeland partnered with British naturalist Martyn Stewart, who is affectionately known as “the David Attenborough of sound.” He has traveled all over the globe, making more than 100,000 field recordings of animals in their natural habitats. Copeland chose twelve of Stewart’s recordings, each taken from a place on the earth that an arctic tern passes through on its annual 44,100-mile journey from pole to pole. So, for example, there are tracks which feature the sounds of the white-throated sparrow or a Galapagos seal or a hyena. He then composed orchestral pieces to complement and converse with each recording. His website describes it this way. “Stewart Copeland's *Wild Concerto* fuses Martyn Stewart's remarkable field recordings with vibrant orchestral textures, crafting a unique soundscape where nature takes the role of the soloist.”

I was captivated by this - not only by the album itself but by this incredible process of recording sounds from the natural world and weaving them together with music created by a human being. What a wonderful partnership in creating beauty together - the kind of partnership I suspect God had in mind when instructing humans to care for Creation.

Sadly, in talking about this project, Martyn Stewart points out that many of the creatures you hear in “Wild Concerto” are endangered species. His recordings may soon be all that is left of them. For more than 55 years, Stewart has been traveling the globe making these recordings and says that at this point, “75% of the landscapes and soundscapes he has recorded have now vanished, been silenced, or suffered significant degradation.” He has seen firsthand the impact of humanity’s recklessness, and our destruction of the creation God entrusted to us.

In our Judeo-Christian tradition, the relationship between humanity and God’s world goes back to the very beginning when God created everything including us. We actually have two creation stories. One tells of God creating the world and everything in it in six days as James Weldon Johnson captures in his amazing poem, “The Creation.” Each day, God says the creation is good. The second tells of God creating man from the earth and breathing life into him. The two stories came from two different sources in two different time periods. Yet, they have one thing in common. Each says that when God created life and all that is in the world, God called on humanity to care for it.

At the end of the first of our creation stories, God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” The Hebrew word translated as “dominion” is *radah*, and its meaning is closer to caregiving or nurturing than to dominating or exploiting. Again, in the second creation story, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it.” In fact, these are the very first words God speaks to a human, and they are directions for how

we should relate to the natural world. The Hebrew word for “care” is *shamar* and means to watch, guard, and protect.

To care for Creation is sacred work in part because life, in all its many forms, is one of the ways that God reveals God’s self to us. In creation, we see God’s beauty in everything from a full moon to the tiniest of wildflowers. We see diversity in an incredibly vast array of living things in all shapes and sizes, colors and patterns. We see intricacy in the complex inner workings of each living being as well as the functioning of whole ecosystems. We see majesty in mountains that rise up over the plains and power in the waves crashing against the ocean shore. All of this reflects back to us the nature and character of God.

Yet, God’s purpose for creation isn’t only to reveal God’s self to us but also to provide for us. In fact, God provides for all of God’s creatures, human and non-human alike. And God’s provision is not just for us or for the living beings that occupy the earth today but for all future generations, as well. In creation, we find food to eat, the means to make shelter and clothing for ourselves, fresh water to drink, and sources of energy we can harness to help us in our work. In both creation stories, God says these are God’s gifts to us for our own sustenance.

That said, as we heard in our scripture readings, scripture also tells us that all of creation, everything we have, including our own lives, belongs to God. As humans, this is easy for us to forget. We like to think and act as though everything on the earth belongs to us. That because we have the means and desire to use up earth’s resources or destroy God’s creation, we have a right to do so.

Yet, that is not God’s intention for us, which is why the environmental crisis we find ourselves in today matters to us as people of faith. We show our gratitude and love for God by how we nurture and protect God’s creation. This is both our privilege and our responsibility. How we interact with Creation not only reflects our love for God but our love for neighbor, as well. The decisions we make about how we use the world’s resources can either support our neighbor or hurt them. When climate change leads to droughts and food supplies run low. When hurricanes and typhoons destroy whole communities. When greenhouse gas emissions destroy the ozone layer. These are all signs that we are not loving our global neighbors. And we know that all of the impacts of human misuse of creation most profoundly affect those Jesus would call “the least of these.”

While the idea that we are stewards of creation has been woven into our faith tradition from the earliest days of Judaism, it is part of our Methodist tradition, as well. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached a number of sermons on the subject saying, “[God] entrusts us with [this world’s goods] on this express condition, that we use them only as our Master’s goods, and according to the particular directions which he has given us in his Word.”

Thus, Stewardship of Creation is one of our United Methodist social principles. Our Book of Discipline reads, “All creation is the Lord’s, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect.”

So, if we are called by God to be stewards of Creation, what exactly does that mean? A steward is someone who cares for the property of its owner. In their biblical study “Why Are We Stewards of Creation?,” World Vision International looks at stewardship as paying attention to four aspects of caretaking. First is to be attentive to what the owner’s intentions are for their property. In this case, we bring ourselves back over and over again to God’s intention that the earth’s resources be used to provide for all the creatures who live here. God’s intention was not that humans destroy the lives of some creatures in order to better their own. Related to this is that good stewards pay attention to those things that are close to the owner’s heart. We know through both Old and New Testament writings that God stands particularly with the poor and the oppressed. So, we have a responsibility to make sure that resources are cultivated and distributed fairly so that all of God’s people have access to what they need.

To do that well, as stewards we are attentive to the needs of Creation. We make sure to let the land rest between plantings and provide the soil with nutrients. We treat domesticated animals kindly, and provide them with adequate food, water, and space. We protect ecosystems by making sure not one part of the system is destroyed causing others to suffer.

Finally, good stewards of creation think not only of the present but of the future. It is our responsibility to ensure that creation will thrive and provide for generations to come.

All of this really comes down to interacting with creation with the same love that God does and with a reverence for God’s handiwork. To view its beauty with awe and wonder. To delight in the playfulness of monkeys or the silliness of a male peacock strutting his stuff. To be stunned by the delicate patterns of a spider’s web. To give thanks for corn right off the cob, ripe tomatoes, and the roughly 400 different kinds of beans we have to choose from. To look at the world and see, as Richard Rohr puts it, “Each and every creature is a unique word of God, with its own message, its own metaphor, its own energetic style, its own way of showing forth goodness, beauty, and participation in the Great Mystery. Each creature has its own glow and its own unique glory. To be a contemplative is to be able to see each epiphany, to enjoy it, protect it, and draw upon it for the common good.”

And, above all, to work in partnership with creation as Stewart and Copeland have done, recognizing that our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren are indelibly interwoven with the lives of every other living creature on this planet. Their care lies in our hands.

May it be so. Amen.