



“The Hills Are Alive”

Isaiah 55:8-13

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It was an April worship service several years ago. It was the Sunday after Earth Day. Ann was standing next to me beautifully praying for creation. And there was a big, noisy fly buzzing around us - hovering over the grape juice and bread. All I wanted to do was take out that fly – the fly was clearly nearing the end of its life, fat and slow. I could kill it with my bare hands. I resisted the urge and spent a few minutes reflecting on my complicated relationship with creation.

And I like to think of myself as someone who has a deep appreciation for nature. I love pretty much all of it: beaches, mountains, prairies, marshes, rivers, oceans.

Don't get me started on trees. I love trees. They are strong and beautiful and complex and persistent. Monk and poet Thomas Merton once wrote:

Nothing has ever been said about God that hasn't already been said better by the wind in the pine trees.

As the prophet Isaiah put it:

And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

I bet every one of you has a story or two or three or thirty when God spoke to you through the natural world, through creation. It's a big theme in the Bible.

The heavens are telling the glory of God.

The psalmist wrote several thousand years ago. This is how Eugene Peterson translates those first verses of Psalm 19:

God's glory is on tour in the skies, God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
Madame Day holds classes every morning,
Professor Night lectures each evening. (*The Message*)

Creation, in all its beauty and complexity, speaks volumes about the creator. We see God, meet God, feel God, in creation.

Creation is beautiful. Soothing. Peaceful.

Except when it's not. Nature can be brutal. Wind. Fire. Flood. Blizzard. Animals killing other animals.

And then there are the parts of creation that are just plain annoying: mosquitos, ticks, heat and humidity. We all love creation until the heat index starts creeping towards 100 degrees.

But even when creation is annoying or intimidating, we experience God. We gaze up at the endlessness of the night sky, we see the vastness of the ocean, and we feel insignificant in the best possible way. Such experiences help me understand my place in things. It's liberating. I remember that God (not me) is the creator of all that is and responsible for everything. In such moments, I breathe in the almost unbearable mystery of life and the awesomeness of creation.

Being in nature is good for us in a multiplicity of ways. We spend time in creation and we are healthier, we live longer. Being outside is strongly linked to lower blood pressure and decreased anxiety, depression, and fatigue. These are facts. Studying and quantifying the health benefits of being in nature is a hot research topic these days.¹

We don't need researchers to tell us that being outside feels good. Good for our bodies. Good for our souls.

Creation is good for us. But are we good for creation?

We all know that the answer to that question is no. The consensus is overwhelming – in the scientific community and in the religious community. The planet is in trouble. And we humans are the source of that trouble.

To summarize: God created the world. It drips with holiness. We humans are harming it. We should stop doing that.

But I'm not confident that we will because our relationship with the natural order is flawed. We act as though the non-human part of creation exists to serve us. We mine nature for its resources. We spend time in nature so that we feel better. We love nature until – like that fly buzzing around communion – it no longer pleases us. And then we do everything we can to manage and control it. Creation is in service to us and our needs, physical and spiritual.

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-better-health-during-the-pandemic-is-two-hours-outdoors-the-new-10-000-steps-11613304002>

That way of viewing creation is not Biblical. Genesis chapter one names lots of things that God creates: light, day, night, sky, earth, seas, plants, trees, seasons, stars, sun, moon, birds, sea creatures, cattle, creeping things, wild animals, humans. We are just one small part of creation. All of creation belongs to God. All of creation is loved by God. Which means that we are not the only ones in relationship to God. As Isaiah writes,

The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

As a child, this was one of my favorite verses in the bible. I loved thinking about the mountains and hills breaking out into song, the trees clapping their branch hands together. It's an image that still challenges me to remember that creation has a relationship with God unmediated by humans.

This way of thinking was reinforced by a movie, a movie I saw many, many times in my childhood. Think wide camera lens, orchestra swelling, Julie Andrews surrounded by the alps singing:

The hills are alive with the sound of music; with songs they have sung for a thousand years.

That is good Biblical theology. Another layer was added to my understanding of creation when I discovered Celtic Christianity. This branch of Christianity adopted much of the symbolism, art and music of ancient Celtic culture, with its emphasis on the sacredness of nature.

The Celts believed that creation shimmered with innate unmediated holiness. Here is a portion of Celtic writing on the subject:

There is no plant in the ground
But is full of God's virtue.
There is no form in the strand
But it is full of God's blessing.
There is no life in the sea,
There is not creature in the river,
There is not in the firmament
But proclaims God's goodness² (from the *Carmina Gadelica*)

Celtic Christianity reminds us that creation is not a thing to be managed but rather a partner in praising and worshipping God.

In 1988, flames engulfed 1.4 million acres in and around Yellowstone National Park. A total of 9,500 fire fighters came from all over the country to participate in what would eventually become a \$140 million dollar effort to extinguish the fires. They built more than 800 miles of fire line, used 117 aircraft and dropped more than 1,000,000 gallons of fire retardant. None of this worked. In the end, it was only the fall rain and snow that stopped the fires.

² The *Carmina Gadelica* is a collection of prayers, hymns, charms, incantations, blessings, runes, and other literary-folkloric poems and songs collected and translated by amateur folklorist Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) in the Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland between 1855 and 1910.

I spent the following summer in Yellowstone. I was a maid during the week, a preacher and worship leader on Sundays. One Sunday I was leading worship. I felt a drop or two of rain and said off handedly, “let’s pray that the rain holds off until we are done.”

A hand went up. It was Dan, a regular worshipper, a park ranger who had been on the front lines of firefighting that previous summer. He said, “Respectfully, Amy, I cannot join you in that prayer. After last summer, I can never pray such a prayer again.”

I’ve never forgotten that moment. I’ve never forgotten my urge to control creation for my convenience. And that’s when I first got to know Dan, a lifelong friend. He has a biblical theology of creation. The child of park service employees, he grew up in Glacier National Park and then spent most of his adulthood in and around Yellowstone. His love and respect for God and his love and respect for creation are hopelessly, wonderfully intertwined.

What would the world look like if all of us humans stopped treating creation as a beautiful and useful backdrop for our lives? How would we behave differently if we joined God in loving and caring for all of creation?

Can you imagine it?

I think I can hear the sound of trees clapping.

Amen.