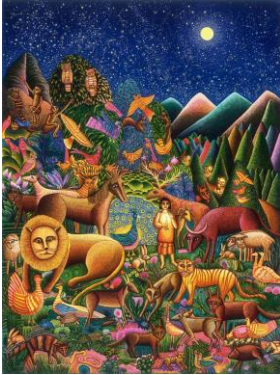


“IN THE FAMILY OF FLORA AND FAUNA”

Job 39:1-12, 26-30; Luke 12:22-31

April 30, 2017 ~ Season of Creation, week 2: Fauna and Flora

Rev. Jerry Duggins



The biblical world and our world are quite different in some important ways. I notice this when we attempt to address contemporary issues in the sermon. It can be difficult to find a scripture that applies to the modern context, and often the obvious one is not the right one.

We run into this problem when trying to address issues related to the environment.



For example, the biblical world couldn't even conceive of the human capacity to cut down large swaths of rain forest. It couldn't imagine the modern ability to remove whole mountaintops.

Now the Bible does know about agriculture and the land's need for rest. It fosters a respect and admiration for the marvels and mysteries of the natural world. If you read carefully, you can discover an environmental ethic that centers in a love for the earth, for its creatures and plants and landscapes. But if you're looking for solid biblical advice addressing the proper relationship between humanity and the flora and fauna of earth, you'd be hard-pressed to find something that addresses the problems of species extinction, the need to preserve wilderness, or the imperative to curtail our use of fossil fuels in favor of renewable resources. The two texts we read this morning in fact are going to require a little extrapolation to come at the learning for today. I have to confess up front that neither is primarily about flora and fauna.

Both are really about the human relationship to God and they come at this question from contrasting viewpoints.



In Job, God speaks from the whirlwind emphasizing this connection between Godself and the natural world with a view toward reminding Job that even were his complaint against God just, he doesn't begin to approach the majesty of God as creator. The litany of God's work intends to humble Job.



The litany in Luke about the birds and the lilies aims at the complete opposite, namely to comfort and reassure Jesus' disciples of God's love. Job reminds us that we cannot approach God in our pride, while Jesus reminds us that we can approach God because God's love exceeds even God's concern for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

Neither scripture is primarily about our relationship to the natural world. And yet they do speak to our situation. There is a connection between our relationship to God and to the world around us. Jesus speaks of two commandments: one to love God and a second to love our neighbor. The two are closely related. The first of letter of John asks how we can claim to love God whom we have not seen if we cannot love our brother or sister whom we have seen. In a similar way, various Psalms model an approach to God based on the wonders of the natural world. Though the Bible doesn't explicitly say it, the way we treat the earth reflects positively or negatively on our relationship to its creator.

These two passages offer us two paths to God: the path of humility, that sees in the earth, its flora and fauna, a mystery beyond our comprehension, and the path of exaltation where the flora and fauna raise our awareness of the depth of God's love. To destroy the earth or even to reshape it to suit us, is in fact to cut ourselves off from God. There is both warning and opportunity here. Rather than explain it though, since this is national poetry month, let me share some words from a few poets.



Wendell Berry turns to the natural world when cynicism about the world's direction tries to take hold of him in this poem called *The Peace of Wild Things*:

“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the green heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

(p.30)



Linda Pastan reminds us how intimate the connection between the earth's flora and our deepest rituals in this poem called *Flowers*:

“Someone I love is getting married,
and I am composing poems about flowers, hyacinths
and lilacs, as if there were something
intrinsically bridal about these outgrowths of the plant
flaunting itself, attracting insects and birds
to the exact and fragrant place of pollen.

And someone I love is dying.
Flowers will be wanted for her too,

lilies perhaps, though all that is required
is a handful of good dirt on a plain pine box,
and all the funeral bouquets will be sent
to a hospital somewhere, where the sick will wake

one morning to a confusion of scents.
I wonder, partly in innocence,
why everything seems to mean something else,
and I marvel at how we comfort
ourselves and each other with the fragile
symptoms of beauty, with petals

of roses for love, with snowdrops for hope,
whether we are setting out on a journey
or simply waving good-bye from the dock
as the ship pulls out and a wake of tossed flowers
floats for a little while, delicate as foam
on the water, before it disappears.

(p.57)



Mary Oliver uses an image that challenges her to be changed in this poem called *Swan*:

Did you see it, drifting, all night on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air,
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,
like a waterfall
knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light
of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?” (p.15)

The Bible doesn't forbid us from cutting down trees or damming up rivers. It doesn't explicitly foster a concern for endangered species. It does demand sustainable agricultural practices. It does marvel at the wonders of creation, both plant and animal life. It calls on the landscape itself to praise God, though it hardly need do so. Anyone who is paying the least attention can see that the mountains rejoice in God, that the canyons testify to the majesty of God. We are ourselves part of the earth, made from the soil according to Genesis. It's interesting that God first seeks for a companion for the human being among the animals. We belong to the family of flora and fauna and we should be mindful not just of God's love for us, but of God's love for creation as well. I'll close with these words from John Muir in his essay called *The American Forests*:



“The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted. The whole continent was a garden, and from the beginning it seemed to be favored above all the other wild parks and gardens of the globe. To prepare the ground it was rolled and sifted in seas with infinite loving deliberation and forethought, lifted into the light, submerged and warmed over and over again, pressed and crumpled into folds and ridges, mountains, and hills, subsoiled with heaving volcanic fires, ploughed and ground and sculptured into scenery and soil with glaciers and rivers, - every feature growing and changing from beauty to beauty, higher and higher. And in the fullness of time it was planted in groves, and belts, and broad exuberant, mantling forests, with the largest, most varied, most fruitful, and most beautiful trees in the world.

Bright seas made its border, with wave embroidery and icebergs; gray deserts were outspread in the middle of it, mossy tundras on the north, savannas on the south, and blooming prairies and plains; while lakes and rivers shone through all the vast forests and openings, and happy birds and beasts gave delightful animation. Everywhere, everywhere over all the blessed continent, there were beauty and melody and kindly, wholesome, foodful abundance” (p.701).

Resources:

Berry, Wendell. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Counterpoint: Berkeley CA, 1998.

Muir, John. *John Muir: Nature Writings* Library of America: Penguin Books, New York NY, 1997.

Oliver, Mary. *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* Beacon Press: Boston MA, 2010.

Pastan, Linda. *An Early Afterlife: Poems*. W.W.Norton & Co. New York, NY, 1995.