

God's Stained-Glass World

Psalm 98: 4, 7-8

- ¹ The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
- ² for God has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
- ³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in God's holy place?
- ⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
- ⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

For Easter this year, the kids chalked a stained-glass mural on our driveway. Several neighbors, who were going on their daily strolls stopped. Some made comments; others snapped a picture on their phones. They took a pause. A breath. What the psalmist calls a *selah*. It was a powerful Easter proclamation for me: That resurrection affirms the sacredness within all of creation. That our world is God's stained-glass sanctuary. It's why the psalms repeat the refrain that all of creation praises its Creator. The trees clap their hands, the hills offer their story songs; the entire earth is saturated in holiness, and all of it belongs within the theatre of God's glory.

I think we are growing more and more aware of this reality in times like these. Many of us are finding an oasis from our stress in the outdoor scene. We see neighbors waving as they go by, some stopping to smell flowers. We are planting and playing in the dirt. Even my mother told me this week that my father, who never fancied himself a gardener, has been outside gardening almost every day. Whenever I ask someone what is keeping them sane during these times, almost every single person has said, getting outside—being in the sanctuary of creation. It's why Jewish folklore says we are all *adam*—earth people—who were created from the clay of the earth and filled with wind, and are called to be the earth's partners and protectors. Because we are literally bound to all of creation. And especially these days, I think we can feel the truth of their wisdom.

Tragically, it has taken a pandemic to force us to pause and reconnect with our roots. For the first time in thirty years, people in India can look out into the horizon and see the Himalayas. For thirty years, the fog of industrial waste covered the majesty of the mountains and it was an out of sight out of mind situation. And now that they can finally see the snow-caps again, they are like, "Hey, that's pretty cool! We could get used to this!?" Or look at pictures taken from satellites of before and after the coronavirus. We can see pictures of highly polluted areas hovering over Italy, China, or especially the United States. What used to be a

circle of red to mark the amount of hazardous toxins filtering into our air is now green and blue—I mean, doesn't red mean stop!? People can breathe outside for the first time in decades. They are seeing mountains and stars and are reconnecting with something sacred. Which raises the question: why would we want to go back to the way it was before?

Now I want to be perfectly clear that I am very sensitive to those who lost their jobs and are scared they might lose everything right now. We all want this crisis to be over with so we can move forward with our lives and livelihoods. But if this moment has shown us anything it is that we cannot move forward by going backwards. Especially if it is to a way of being that is at the expense of creation. I mean, have we not sacrificed enough on the altar of economic prosperity? Have we not seen the ramifications of a planet that is clearly burnt out? It is why my heart aches whenever our leaders think it is a good idea to roll back environmental protection policies while promoting agendas which further exploit and threaten creation. It is unnatural because it moves us into the opposite direction of who we are created to be. And as earth people what impacts the earth impacts all of us.

It is why the psalmist insists that all of creation praises and belongs to God. Everything. Because God's sacred fingerprint has touched all of it. It is also why the text says that the people who will be able to receive creation as a blessing are those with clean hands and pure hearts (a fitting metaphor during a pandemic, don't ya think?). But it also claims the other side as well: that those who will miss the blessing are those who "lift up their souls to what is false" (which is also a fitting phrase for what we are watching unfold). It is a word of caution that prioritizing wealth over health, choosing economy over ecology, or promoting what is false over what is true, we will forget who we are. We will miss the blessing. We won't be able to see what is holy even when it is right before our eyes.

Recently we watched a documentary about divers whose job is to capture the behaviors of humpback whales and study them to learn more. There is one scene which brought me to awe about our connection to creation.

The deep-sea diver notices one humpback whale approaching him, then two, then three. Then something astonishing happens: the three humpback whales begin dancing together. You can see them spinning and swirling and floating through the water with their fins outstretched as if they were wings soaring through the sky. Sometimes the three whales are synchronized, others they are following one another's lead—always artfully aware of their choreographed movements. The diver remarks that being in the front row of this theatrical drama was, "One of the greatest experiences of my life."

The ballet of these humpback whales remains a mystery to us. What are they doing? Could it be a ritual? Or is it a rehearsal? Or is it as the psalmist claims: that all of creation praises its Creator? I believe that it could even be a dance choreographed like that of the Holy Trinity. Three whales performing their breathtaking ballet as one, revealing nothing other than the glory of God's stained-glass world.

As we live through these sequestering days, may we pause. May we remember who we are.
And then...may we dance and praise alongside of them.