

All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir

Psalm 148 and Romans 8:18-21

D. Cameron Murchison
Black Mountain, North Carolina

The title of this essay reaches into the memory bank and pulls out the title of Bill Staine's classic folk tune "All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir." It concludes this way:

It's a simple song of livin' sung everywhere
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear
Grumpy alligator and the hawks above
Sly raccoon and the turtle dove.

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws
Or anything they got.

These lyrics capture at least a portion of what is spoken of in Psalm 148. And, of course, in doing so they stand squarely in a long line of songs inspired—directly or indirectly—by this Psalm. Think for example of hymns like "Praise, My Soul the God of Heaven," "Let the Whole Creation Cry," "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," and of course, the classic one written by Francis of Assisi—"All Creatures of Our God and King."

Whether in the folk music of a Bill Staines or in the stately text of a Francis of Assisi, this music is a profound summons to come to terms with something essential for Christian living—today and into the indefinite future. It reels us back into the world of the 148th Psalm and invites us to understand afresh something basic about life in our twenty-first-century world.

I

The central claims of Psalm 148 are both cosmological and anthropological. They have to do with the universe as a whole and with human beings within it. The universal claim is that all creation is summoned to the common task of giving praise to the God who is its initial source *of*—and its final resource *for*—being. The first six verses focus on the outer reaches of the cosmos—the heavens, the heights, those upper reaches of the universe with their animate and inanimate denizens (angels, sun, moon, and shining stars). Almost as if the psalmist has not stretched far enough into those upper reaches, the psalm appeals again to the "highest heavens" and to the "waters above the heavens." In the Hebrew way of thinking, this amounts to an exhaustive reference to "all that is out there."

The reason that praise of God is demanded of the highest and outermost reaches of creation is because these have been uttered into being by God's own command, and they have been founded and bounded by God's own act. As vast as "all that is

out there” may be, God is vaster still. Small wonder that St. Anselm, a theologian of the eleventh century, came in prayerful appreciation to understand God as that than which nothing greater can be imagined. So when this soaring majesty of the universe confronts the yet more soaring majesty of its source, praise is the only fitting response.

The roll call turns from heaven to terra firma in verses 7 through 13, bringing things down to earth, as it were. Here too all the elements of earthly locale, both fanciful and ordinary, are summoned to praise. The unruly, natural forces of the world (sea monsters, deeps, fire, hail, snow, frost, and stormy wind) are also depicted as obedient to the God whose command they fulfill in being what they are. Moreover, the landscape itself is captured in the summons (mountains and hills), along with the flora it nurtures (fruit trees and cedars). And finally the psalmist includes the parts of creation which we, perhaps mistakenly, think are alone in the ability to sense the world around them. The psalmist summons animals, domesticated and otherwise, to the chorus of praise (wild animals, cattle, creeping and flying creatures).

This is of course the part of the psalm that Bill Staines incorporates into “All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir.” It captures in delightful verse some of these last named members of creation that are summoned to praise.

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And after these nonhuman animals are comprehensively named, the Psalmist moves on to the full range of humankind, embracing in the call both the elite—kings, princes, rulers—and the ordinary—young and old, men and women. Together with those earlier mentioned “outer reaches” of the cosmos, these “inner reaches” are summoned into the universal combined choir that acknowledges the glory of that One above earth and heaven than which nothing greater can be imagined, and in whom is found the origin and destiny of all creatures, great and small.

Thus the overarching, universal claim of Psalm 148 is that the proper purpose of all that exists—known and unknown, seen and unseen—is to give adoration and praise to God. So the language of praise is in the words of Patrick Miller “the speech that is truly primal and universal. All existence is capable of praising God and does so. In such speaking, God is identified.”¹ In this way creation itself is witness to the reality of God as Creator. And that is precisely the universal claim of Psalm 148—all nature acknowledges *the* Maker of Heaven and Earth in its chorus of praise.

II

We come closer to the “orienting” significance of this psalm for our lives in the

twenty-first century when we turn to its claim about humanity. Karl Barth has suggested that this psalm impresses a deep humility on humankind. “As we must say of [human beings] that [they are] what [they are] only in gratitude towards God, we shall have to say the same of all other creatures.”² So the first point of the psalm’s anthropology is not that humanity is distinguished and different from the rest of creation, but that humankind is united to all the rest. As the repeated refrain of the psalm makes clear, that unity is found in the wonder of praise to God. As James Mays has put it, “We human beings are one with all being in our relation to One whose name alone is exalted and whose majesty is above earth and heaven.”³ Our kinship with all of creation is complete in the act of giving praise to God.

Yet the theological anthropology of Psalm 148 has another dimension. Notwithstanding the unity of humanity with the rest of creation in the chorus of praise, humanity has a special vocation within this shared, common vocation. Just because we can voice the praise native to all creation, we humans have a unique responsibility not only to call upon the rest of creation for praise, but to attend to the well being of the rest of creation so that it survives and endures to give praise. And as we are learning all too well, whether creation will survive and endure for such praise is an open question.

The most chilling vision I know that depicts a created order without vitality sufficient for such praise is Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*. As an account of a father and son trying to survive in a world that has suffered an undefined apocalyptic collapse, it depicts a world without any of the delight found in Psalm 148. The story gives us frightful descriptions of human community that has broken down under the weight of societal collapse. But equally chilling are its descriptions of a natural order that renders no praise, but only a relentless, sluggish, gray, wet, cold, oppressive, death-threatening presence. It portrays a landscape with only fleeting glimpses of life, all passing inexorably toward death, rendering no praise. And if we are too readily inclined to dismiss this as fear-mongering fiction, we might want to listen to the testimony of Denise Giardina, novelist and Episcopal priest. She speaks with simple eloquence about the spiritual devastation wrought in Appalachia by mountaintop removal—a mining procedure that forgoes tunneling into the earth and instead simply breaks majestic mountains into rubble in order to more easily extract the coal—a procedure that has become the preferred way to satisfy *our* insatiable demands for energy.

Where once magnificent vistas of mountains existed that have inspired poetry, prose, and song, there now remain flattened plains, occluded streams, polluted waters, and barren fields that cannot support the life that previously called it home. And in deepest irony, the coal thus produced when converted to electricity is likely a prime contributor to long term climate change that tends toward the kind of “collapse” that Jared Diamond has chronicled in a book of that same name. Multiply that kind of disregard of the earth’s vocation to give praise to God over the face of globe, and Cormac McCarthy’s eerie vision seems much too close for comfort.

Put simply, the theological anthropology of Psalm 148 is finally a theological ethic that requires the human family—and certainly the Christian family on behalf of the human family—to give priority to the care of creation as a fundamental part of its core belief—that humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Knowing that this chief end is shared with all creation means that we have a

fundamental responsibility to support and nurture the highest beings of heaven and the lowest creatures of earth (from mountain tops to snail darters) so that their voices continue unabated in the universal, combined chorus of praise.

Conclusion

But what in the world can we do about any of this? The greatest threat to our meeting the challenge that Psalm 148 lays before us comes from the fear that what we do will not make a real difference. After all, we are not by and large in positions of authority, able to issue orders and expect results to follow. But we are the people of a God who in the resurrection of Jesus has given the first fruit of what is promised, not just for humans, but for all creation. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul voiced a scope to salvation that encompasses all of creation when he said it is not only the human family but “the creation itself [that] will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

Every day the theme of resurrection is as crucial as it is on Easter day. For in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, we discover the resource that will enable us to summon the universal choir to its proper praise. Jesus’ resurrection is the enactment by God of something beyond all human and creaturely possibilities, the establishment of a new creation just where the old creation has come to its inevitable end.

Psalm 148 does not speak of a tree-hugging, animal rights political correctness. But it does speak of a theological vision that may move us to hug trees and many other creatures and features in this splendid, praise-rendering world that God has made. So let Psalm 148 awaken us to the deeper meaning of folk songs and great hymns of worship. It is more than good music for tapping our toes or marching in and out of worship. It is music that recalls us to a special vocation for the human family in tending the creation that God makes *and summons in its entirety* to joyful, continuous, even raucous, praise. Let us not mistake care for the creation as incidental to the life of faith, but rather let us regard it as belonging to the fabric of faith itself. And let us look for ways in our common life that may help us live into the challenge. Then we will begin to grasp—and begin to be grasped by—the claims of this psalm on us and on the world. Then we will begin to embrace our unique vocation to sustain the ability of the whole creation to “Praise the Lord!” All God’s critters got a place in the choir!

Notes

1 Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 73.

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/2* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 172.

3 James Luther Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 445.