

**MAJESTY ON EARTH**  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Psalm 148 (NRSV)**

**Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!  
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!  
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!  
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.  
He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.  
Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!  
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!  
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!  
Young men and women alike, old and young together!  
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.  
He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.  
Praise the Lord!**

I was about eight years old, dressed as usual, in underwear, shorts, socks and cowboy boots. I seldom wore a shirt, but my trusty six-shooter was strapped around my waste. My skin was almost a mahogany brown, my hair sun bleached. I was lying on the St. Augustine grass with my face to the sun. It was a hot day. We had just finished fighting a hundred thousand Indians and were victorious in saving the town. Because the sun was so bright I closed my eyes, but could still see its radiance through my eyelids. Its warmth seemed to flow through me to the earth beneath me. My breathing became calm. My body relaxed. I did not fall asleep, but as if in a trance, I could not distinguish myself from the earth and the sun. We were three entities but one being. Somehow those moments seemed special as if I was in harmony with life. Today I call them sacred moments. Today I might talk about panentheism but such

talk could never replicate the experience. I might compare those moments with Ralph Waldo Emerson's phrase, "transparent eyeball," but Mr. Emerson can never be so simply categorized. Nor can Nature.

I submit to you that the childhood experience trumps philosophy. Consider this prayer/poem, "Goodnight God" by four-and-a-half year old Danu Baxter:

I hope that you are having  
 a good time being the world.  
 I like the world very much.  
 I'm glad you made the plants  
 and trees survive with the rain and summers.  
 When summer is nearly near  
 the leaves begin to fall.  
 I hope you have a good time  
 being the world.  
 I like how God feels around  
 everyone in the world.  
 God, I am very happy that  
 I live on you.  
 Your arms clasp around the world.  
 I like you and your friends.  
 Every time I open my eyes  
 I see the gleaming sun.  
 I like the animals – the deer,  
 and us creatures of the world,  
 the mammals.  
 I love my dear friends.<sup>1</sup>

Like Danu, the earth has fed my soul since childhood. I cannot think of God without the experience of Nature. I cannot imagine the heavenly host without the sense that it includes this planet on which I live, but also the farthest galaxies of the cosmos. I cannot conceive of God beyond this life. This does not mean that God is limited to my experience but that I cannot know God beyond my experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Danu Baxter, "Goodnight God," from Sally McFague's *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 130.

I confess to being something like the man who fell over a cliff. On his way down he managed to grab hold of the root of a plant. He was still a long way up and he knew that the plant was beginning to give way under his weight. He yelled out, “If anyone is up there please help me!

“I will help you,” answered a deep and mysterious voice. “I am the Lord your God and I will save you. Now just let go of that root and trust me.”

The man thought for a few seconds and yelled back, “Is there anyone else up there?”

In her book, *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard wrote:

“Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading, as dawn fast over the mountain split.

I wake in a god. I wake in arms holding my quilt, holding my quilt, holding me as best they can inside my quilt.

Someone is kissing me – already. I wake, I cry, “Oh,” I rise from the pillow. Why should I open my eyes?

I open my eyes. The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders. Islands slip blue from his shoulders and glide over the water, the empty, lighted water on a stage.

Today’s god rises, his long eyes flecked in clouds. He flings his arms, spreading colors; he arches, cupping sky in his belly; he vaults, vaulting and spreading, holding all and spread on me like skin.”<sup>2</sup>

I live and move and have my being on the body of God. I live and move and have my being in the body of God. The Spirit of God animates every thing and every one. We call it the breath of life, the animus, or the soul. God is, therefore, the dynamic of matter and spirit. And even when I die and my body is returned to the elements of

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<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977), pp. 11-12.

earth, wind, fire, and rain I am ever in the presence of God. As Emerson declared it, I return to the great Ocean of Being.

When I think about the creation stories of Genesis I do not think of science. They are not stories about physics or biology. The creation stories of Genesis are about relationships between human beings, the earth, and God. They are stories about trust, responsibility, and truth telling. They are stories about what happens when trust is violated, when responsibility becomes blame, and what lying does to both trust and responsibility. I feel sad for the people who look to Genesis for how the earth was created. Genesis is not science. When these people fight about evolution or creationism they are missing the deeper witness that Genesis gives to relationships.

This reminds me of the joke about the zookeeper who noticed that the orangutan was reading two books - the Bible and Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Surprised he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both of those books?"

"Well," said the orangutan, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."<sup>3</sup>

What Darwin's evidence of natural selection brings to us, complemented by genetic studies of plants and animal, plus the idea of a spontaneous explosion of life that some call the "Big Bang" theory is the unavoidable conclusion that we are all related. Yes there are apparent progressions of life. There are myriad species. Yet there are no absolute distinctions and we are increasingly aware of the interdependence of life. Ian Barbour pointed out that the handful of sand, or weeds

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<sup>3</sup> Science Jokes. [www.sciencejokes.blogspot.com/2007/03/jokes-darwin-evolution-creationist.html](http://www.sciencejokes.blogspot.com/2007/03/jokes-darwin-evolution-creationist.html). Downloaded 4/24/2010.

from the garden, and the human brain were forged out of the furnace of stars. Sally McFague uses Barbour's observation to remind us that there is no absolute superiority among the species of life and reminds us that the higher levels of life are dependent on the lower levels of life. It you do not believe that let me ask you what you had for breakfast. Cereal? Ham and eggs? McFague wrote:

“That is, the so-called higher levels depend on the lower ones rather than vice-versa. This is obviously the case with human beings and plants; the plants can do very nicely without us, in fact better, be we would quickly perish without them...This very important point needs to be underscored: *The higher and more complex the level, the more vulnerable it is and dependent upon the levels that support it.*”<sup>4</sup>

All of life is spawned from a common source of energy, energy that is never lost. We are animated with the power of this life. The French call it *vital élan*. We used to distinguish the living from the deceased with the term, “the quick and the dead.” When someone expires his or her last breath we say that he or she, “gave up the ghost.” These notions hold a primal conviction by human beings that we are made alive by the breath of life. I am only suggesting that all of nature, all organic being is quick, alive, and vital. Every species shares the same wind, breath, and air of being.

Why am I sharing these ruminations with you? I believe that as we destroy the planet we are also assaulting the body of God. As we foul the waters, poison the air, and leech away the green house we erode one of the most sacred expressions of God. We diminish the most visible evidence of God's mystery and wonderful joy.

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<sup>4</sup> McFague, p. 106.

My hope is that a recovery of the sacred presence of God in all of life might encourage us to take better care of God. When you have a relationship with people that you love you look after them. You make sure they are comfortable. You keep them nourished and clean. Just as we do unto others so we do unto God. So as we do unto the earth we do unto God.

Now I realize that some people do not agree with me. They believe that God is in heaven or distant and removed from the planet and its animals and people. Some believe that God created the world and stepped away. Some people believe that because of the so-called “fall” of Adam and Eve the earth is also fallen. Some even believe that the earth is the devil’s play ground and like her people is corrupted.

I do not believe that. I believe with God that all of the creation is good, very, very good. The creation is of God and is God.

There are also some people who think that the earth and all her resources have only one purpose and that is to provide raw material for human consumption. They think that human beings are to have “dominion” over the earth, even if it means exploiting the earth. They do not know that the intent of that piece of scripture was about respect for, caring for, and nurturing the earth. We used to call it stewardship. We used to call it conservation.

Too many people are ignorant about these things. But there are also many people who know how to see God in the day as it rises out of the ocean. They think they are only seeing matter or astrophysics. They think they are only witnessing the laws of nature. They do not see the indomitable spirit of

life that loves to play on the waves, howl across the prairie with fifty mile an hour winds, spray like a fine mist in the spring mountains of North Carolina. No, those folks cannot see, or taste, or feel, or hear the Creator dancing before us. They should learn how to do that. I think they might have a more joyful life. I think they might be closer to God.

I had that experience just the other day. It was late and it had been a hard day. I was sitting in McDonald's reading a book and drinking coffee while Emily was at dance. While I was there I saw a teenager swipe a hamburger off the tray of another customer and run out the door. I wondered if he was hungry. One of the employees is mentally challenged. His temptation is to spend all of his time talking to customers, not understanding that he is interrupting people. The manager reproached him. He blurted, "I worked hard yesterday." A few moments later he moved from empty table to empty table, talking to no one. He squirted each table with a cleaning disinfectant and wiped the table dry. When he had worked the entire dining room he repeated his rounds, even cleaning tables he had just done.

In the midst of all of this I heard a very tiny child's laughter. It was the laughter of a three year old. He would shout to his father "Hey!" and burst into giggles. It went on for several minutes. The more I listened the more I heard the voice of God. The voice said, "Gary, lighten up. Can't you see that I am having the time of my life with this little boy." I smiled.

Just before I left I went over to his table. I said to the mom and dad, “Hi, my name is Gary. I just wanted you to know that this has been a tough day for me and your little boy has brought healing in my life.”

The mom looked stunned. She said, “Oh, well, thank you.”

“No ma’am,” I said. “Thank you. He is a blessing.”

This is the majesty of God that the Psalmist was singing about. The joy and glory of God is everywhere, including the fire, hail, snow, frost, and stormy wind. From the angels and common folks like you and me it is worthy of praise, from the sun and moon to the earth and her seas. Praise God from mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars. For God’s majesty is everywhere in everyone.

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