

“Creation Cries We Need to Hear”

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Based upon Psalm 19:1-11; Numbers 22:1-6, 22-35

“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day after day pours forth speech, and night and night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world,” the Psalmist proclaimed. I’ve been thinking about that silent speech of Creation ever since we heard from *Luke* on Palm Sunday a few weeks ago, that Jesus told the Pharisees who objected to his parade, that if his followers were silent, even the stones would cry out. Wouldn’t it have been amazing if they had in a way that the Pharisees could have heard? Yet perhaps they could have screamed, and still no one would have paid attention that day. Human beings tend to be so self-absorbed that if the voice of the heavens is not heard, as the psalmist said, then the likelihood that anyone would have listened to a few rocks that day, when so much human politicking was going on, seems remote.

What would the rocks have said that day? If you look at the role of Creation in the rest of the Bible it seems pretty clear that they would have been singing praise to God. Creation consistently sides with God and celebrates God throughout the Bible. From the story of the first Creation in *Genesis*, Chapter 1, when the goodness of the Lord is evident in the sun and stars, the trees and grass, and the swimming, flying, and crawling creatures of the earth, to the story of the new creation’s completion in *Revelation*, when God’s creatures join the chorus of the faithful in singing praise to God, (see Rev. 5:11-14), Creation witnesses to God’s will, way, and glory. The rainbow speaks of God’s eternal promise not to destroy humanity with natural events. (Gen. 9:12-17). The stars speak of God’s promise to Abraham to be a blessing for multitudes. (Gen. 15:5-6). The mountains serve as the jury when the prophets bring God’s lawsuit against Israel and Judah. (Micah 6:1-4). The ravens feed the prophet Elijah when he is caught in a famine and drought (1 Kings 17:6). The great fish we think of as a whale swallows Jonah when he is disobediently fleeing God’s commission. (Jonah 3). The lilies of the field and the sparrows in the sky speak of God’s provident care (Luke 12:27), and the fig tree of human sinfulness (Matt. 24:32). A fish provides money for taxes (Matt. 17:24-27), and a donkey witnesses to Christ’s reign and sacrifice (Matt. 21:1-11).

It has been said that the land in Israel is the 5th gospel, and it is in the sense that knowing the geography significantly affects how you read the story. But in the whole of the Bible it isn’t just the land which speaks, it’s also the trees and birds, wind, clouds, and rain. As the *Book of Job* reminds us: “Ask the animals, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” (Job 12:7-9). “Go to the ant, you lazybones,” *Proverbs* advises, “consider its ways and be wise.” (Prov. 6:6). Creation gets to be God’s cheering chorus whenever God is trying to make a point, and often serves as a teaching tool in the making of it. But as today’s lesson from *The Book of Numbers* illustrates, we aren’t always good at listening to that teaching.

The story of Balaam's donkey is a very old one. Since the donkey actually talks in the story, most scholars classify it as didactic fiction – a parable of sorts – trying to convey a point using the name of a real seer who was famous for a time. Just as we tell stories about George Washington chopping down cherry trees or never telling a lie, this one was written not just to entertain, but to teach us an important truth. Whether the donkey actually talked with the power of God is beside the point.

Balaam, as I said, was a great seer who lived during the time period when the Hebrew people were finally getting ready to move into the Promised Land, after wandering in the wilderness for a generation. As they got closer and closer, God helped the Hebrews to conquer the various nations which attacked them trying to stop them. This made Balak, the king of Moab, a nation which bordered the Promised Land, very nervous. He knew he didn't stand a chance taking on the Hebrews in battle. But since the Hebrews seemed to have divine favor on their side, he thought he might defeat them if he could just replace that favor with a curse. So, he sent a message to the famous seer-for-hire, Balaam, saying that he wanted him to curse Israel, and would pay him handsomely for his trouble. There's a bit of back and forth in Chapter 22 while Balaam decides how to respond. At first, he refuses because God tells him not to go. But eventually, after a very fancy entourage shows up to escort him and offer him more money, he grabs his donkey and sets out, believing that God has OK'd the trip.

Whether Balaam got that part wrong or God changed God's mind, by the next paragraph God is angry and decides to thwart Balaam's journey by having an angel with a drawn sword block his way. The donkey sees the angel, but Balaam, notwithstanding all of his supposed "seer" powers, does not. Three times the donkey balks at moving forward, and three times Balaam responds by beating the donkey. Finally, the Lord enables the donkey to speak not just with his body language, but also with actual words that Balaam can hear: "Why are you beating me?" the donkey demands. "Have I ever done you wrong before that would lead you to think I am intentionally being disobedient?" Balaam is so embarrassed by the donkey's behavior in front of his entourage, however, that he still wants to kill it for humiliating him. So, God then opens his eyes, so that he can finally see what the donkey has seen all along. Only then, when Balaam sees the angel with the sword, does he recognize how sinful his behavior has been toward both the donkey and God. With the angel's permission, he continues his journey to meet with Balak. But when Balak asks him to curse Israel three times, like his own wise donkey, three times Balaam refuses and blesses them instead. It takes a faithfully stubborn donkey to teach an unfaithfully stubborn man how to listen to and obey the Lord.

If only all of humanity had taken this lesson to heart long ago! If we had paid attention to the trees and the air, the water and all the wise creatures that dwell therein, and recognized that the way that we were treating them was sinful, then we wouldn't be having the problems we are now. God commanded that we be stewards of all of Creation, serving and preserving all that God made and called good. (Gen. 1:15). But humankind has always been more interested in power, convenience, and short-term profit than faithfulness. Especially since the Industrial Revolution, we have polluted and consumed without adequate consideration of the consequences. Now the factual evidence for human-caused climate change is irrefutable. Politicians may still spin and

debate the data, but the overwhelming majority of scientists don't. They are certain that the earth is warming, the ice is melting, the seas are rising. They can measure the increase in the number of extreme storms, and the number of species suffering extinction. We may not have that kind of specific data. But if you pay attention, it isn't hard to see and hear Creation crying. In my own lifetime, I have witnessed dramatic changes in the temperatures in the Adirondacks where I have vacationed my whole life, in the amount of wildlife in the nature preserves on Sanibel Island, where my mother has lived for much of hers, and even in the number of birds and butterflies in my backyard. Yet like Balaam, many in our nation especially, but also in other places in the world, refuse to hear and see because to do so would require radically changing our ways, and we, like Balaam, have our own plans and profit in mind.

Jim Antal in his book, Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change, tells a story about our stubborn blindness that shows just how loud and obvious the cries of Creation have become, and how sinful our obstinate refusal to change. From the 1950s until 1982, outside of Butte, Montana, there was a copper mine called the Berkley Pit. It was the world's largest open pit mine. When it was shut down in 1982, no one thought about what had been left behind in the ravaged earth. The company stopped paying to operate the pumps which kept the pit dry. So soon the pit filled with rain and snow, which eventually created a lake. But it wasn't a beautiful, redemptive lake; it was a toxic brew of acid and heavy metals from the ore. Life was impossible there. Yet the body of water kept growing and growing in size. In 1995, a flock of over three hundred geese caught in a snowstorm landed on the lake, hoping to rest for the night. By morning they were all dead, consumed by the sulfuric acid in the lake. Their shocking death prompted people to complain for a time. But nothing was ever done about the mess. So in 2016, when a storm from Canada blew in 3,000-4,000 exhausted snow geese into town, people knew what would happen. This time some people tried to shoo the animals away in every way possible. But the birds were too tired and wouldn't move. Again, in the morning the scene was carnage. "The die-off in 1995, should have been a wake-up call," a county official said. "Instead we hit the snooze button."¹

We cannot keep hitting the snooze button and ignoring the alarms around us. It's both foolish and immoral. But in order to make us respond faster and better, it is going to take more than the animals and the water and the air crying out to wake up humanity, and especially the powers-that-be, enough for us to both see and respond to the problems. It's going to take human voices crying out too because there are too many human beings on this earth who seem unable to hear Creation cries, and too many who would rather beat the donkey for refusing to serve us, than listen to what he is saying, and change their behavior accordingly. As servants of the Creator, we must speak out because our faith has made us especially equipped to appreciate both the goodness of God's Creation and the sinfulness of human behavior. We must speak out because our faith requires us to join in Creation's chorus, calling for all to follow the will and way of God.

¹ Antal, Jim, Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change, (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018), 39.

Psalm 19 articulates this calling by having a celebration of the Law immediately follow a celebration of nature's speech. It seems almost like a non-sequitur at first. One minute we are listening to the heavens, next the Law. But as a famous rabbi called Rav. Soloveitchick put it, "What is the tale of the heavens if not the declaration of the commandments? All of existence declares the glory of God – man's obligation to order his life according to the will of the Almighty."² The silent revelation of God in nature is given voice in the revelation of God in the Law. Observe God's Law faithfully, and Creation is cared for as a neighbor. Everybody has enough and all living things are respected and cherished. Observe God's way, and we join in the chorus of the heavens glorifying God's name.

Of course as Christians, we recognize a source of revelation even greater than the Law, the revelation in the risen Christ who embodied and fulfilled the Law. But knowing God through Jesus does not alleviate us of our responsibility to Creation. If anything, just the opposite, because Jesus gave voice to Creation even while teaching the Law. Most of the examples and images he used for his lesson on God's will and God's way come from nature. He equated the Spirit with the wind (John 3), the Word with a seed (Matt. 13:18), and the kingdom with a mustard tree (Matt. 13:31-32). He spoke of sowing and reaping God's grace, of being good soil (Luke 8:4-15) and fruitful trees (Luke 6:43-45). He told us we were sheep (John 10), that we would be fed by springs of living water (John 4), and that we must stay rooted in the vine (John 15). After the Resurrection, he proclaimed the redeeming grace of God from the midst of a garden (John 20), and later from a beach by the sea, through an abundant catch of fish (John 21). Even more importantly, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God breaking into our world, transforming it with grace, not, as some Christians argue, of God destroying this world and replacing it with another. Jesus spoke of a new creation in the sense of a redemption and restoration of the old, making our world more like it was in the beginning. To be faithful to Jesus, therefore, is both to ensure that the rocks are never silenced, and to join in their chorus of praise. It is to obey God's will and God's way, calling others to do the same, so that the re-creation Christ began can heal both the brokenness in our souls, and the brokenness in our world.

Speaking on behalf of the hunger ministries of our denomination, which are increasingly affected as climate change issues affect food production, Reverend Rebecca J. Barnes said, "The General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for decades have passed policies that share concern for God's creation, our obligation to be good stewards of the natural world, and our role in reducing energy dependence, promoting renewable and sustainable energy use, and otherwise caring for the earth."³ "The urgency of climate change," her colleague the Reverend Abby Mohaupt added, "requires us to stand as people of faith in general and as Presbyterians in particular and to speak up with prophetic voices. The groans of creation and people on the front lines of the climate crisis will not allow our silence, nor will our faith in Jesus Christ."⁴ All

² As quoted in Spero, Shubert, "*The Rav and the 'Tale Told by the Heavens'*," TRADITION 41:1, Rabbinical Council of America, 2008, 44.

³ Jones, Rich, "*Presbyterian Church Leaders React to Executive Order on Clean Power*," Presbyterian News Service, April 5, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-church-leaders-react-executive-order-clean-power/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

across the country Presbyterians are working to draw attention to the urgent cries of Creation, modeling better stewardship through their own churches and lives, and calling our leaders to accountability and change. Our voices are essential both to translate what Creation is saying for those who do not understand, and to make clear that Creation-care is humanity's God-given responsibility. We don't get a replacement earth, and the time to respond is long overdue. Let us learn from the snow geese, from the donkey and the stars, and make helping, not hurting, our greatest priority. Let us listen to the cries of the rocks, and through our care for them and our world, join in giving glory to the God who made us, saved us, and even now is showing us a better way. Amen.