

Creation Care in *Glory to God*

This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.

The Hymn of Creation

The fourth chapter of Revelation begins with the vision of a vestibule between heaven and earth: “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!” (Rev. 4:1). Through this portal, we glimpse the very throne of God, encircled by a rainbow—the sign of God’s promise to care for “all flesh,” “every living creature,” and “all future generations” (Gen. 9:8–17). God’s throne room erupts in “flashes of lighting” and “peals of thunder” (Rev. 4:5), but above this cosmic clamor we can make out the hymn of four living creatures—lion, ox, human, eagle—singing:

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come”
(Rev. 4:8; cf. Isa. 6:3).¹

This heavenly hymn continues to inspire the church’s song—particularly when we sing of God’s creative gifts and our calling to share in God’s care for creation. In this brief essay on ecological themes in *Glory to God*, I will discuss hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs that focus on the facets of creation care in the past (God who was), present (God who is), and future (God who

is to come). Following the structure of the hymnal, I will also highlight selections as they relate to “God’s Mighty Acts” (#1–#384), “The Church at Worship” (#385–#609), and “Our Response to God” (#610–#853). In each section of this essay I will quote an example of a historic hymn that addresses the topic at hand, followed by other (often more contemporary) texts with similar themes.

Past: God Who Was

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” (Gen. 1:1). The story of salvation begins with God’s creative action—fashioning a world of goodness, order, and beauty, a place of peace, promise, and plenty for all. Human beings are charged with responsibility for God’s good creation (Gen. 1:26), called to “till and keep” their garden home (Gen. 2:15). But sin enters the story—our failure to keep God’s commandment fractures our relationship to the new creation. Now earth’s creatures will live in enmity, struggle for life, and labor for bread (Gen. 3:14–19).

In the context of this ancient story, the church sings—in the past tense—of creation blessed and broken. We praise and thank God for the glory and goodness of creation even as we acknowledge the

ways in which we and our ancestors have failed to care for the world God has made. Following are some hymns and songs that include these themes found in each major section of *Glory to God*: “God’s Mighty Acts,” “The Church at Worship,” and “Our Response to God.”

God’s Mighty Acts

Hymns and psalms about God’s creative work in history abound in *Glory to God*, as they do in every hymnal. Under the heading of “Creation and Providence” (#12–#48) we find many well-known examples of hymns that praise God for the wonder of the natural world, such as this 1864 text by Folliott Sandford Pierpoint: “For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies: Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise” (#14). Other songs with similar themes include “Hallelujah! Sing Praise to Your Creator” (#18), “God of Great and God of Small” (#19), and “Many and Great, O God, Are Thy Works” (#21). These selections, like many others, give thanks and praise to the maker of heaven and earth. They help to inspire the church’s participation in efforts for conservation, particularly with respect to endangered species and habitats.

Notably this subsection of the hymnal is concerned not only with God’s initial creative endeavors but with God’s ongoing providential care as well. As John Milton’s 1624 poem puts it: “All things living God does feed; with full measure, meets their need: for God’s mercies shall endure, ever faithful, ever sure” (#31). Other hymns on God’s providence include “I Sing the Mighty Power of God” (#32), “Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty” (#35), and “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (#39). These songs celebrate our faith in

the God who created the world and continues to provide for the well-being of all creatures. They encourage the church to work for the responsible use and equitable distribution of natural resources so that all people and creatures may have what they need to live and thrive.

The Church at Worship

The classic expression of the church’s praise to God as creator is found in the traditional “doxology” sung (in some version) every Sunday in many congregations: “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow . . .” *Glory to God* includes a variety of settings of this familiar text; these are found among the “Service Music” at #605–#609. Note that each includes a Trinitarian formula—we

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affirm the first person of the Trinity as “creator” and also praise the Spirit and the Son for their roles in shaping and sustaining creation. Trinitarian hymns such as the doxology suggest the relational nature of the God who, in Christ, seeks relationship with us and calls us to live in right relationship with one another, the earth, and all its creatures.

Our Response to God

How do we respond to God’s creative and providential action in history? We sing with wonder and joy at the work of God’s hands in fashioning the world and filling it with life. In the words

of Henry van Dyke's 1907 hymn, "All thy works with joy surround thee; earth and heaven reflect thy rays; stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise" (#611). Other songs of praise for creation include "O Lord, Our Lord" (#613), "O Lord My God" (#625), and "O Sing a New Song" (#639). Such songs allow us to join the hymn of the whole creation in giving glory to God. They also train our voices to speak out when God's good creation is jeopardized or abused.

We also sing with thanksgiving and praise for God's sustaining care, which continues to provide nourishment and protection for the creatures of the earth. As Johann Jacob Schütz wrote in 1675, "What God's almighty power has made God's gracious mercy keepeth; by morning glow or evening shade God's watchful eye ne'er sleepeth" (#645). Other hymns of thanksgiving for God's providential care of creation include "Now Thank We All Our God" (#643), "God Is So Good" (#658), and "Why Should I Feel Discouraged?" (#661). These hymns give voice to our deep gratitude for the grace of God we experience each day through the ordinary blessings of water, air, light, soil, and food—and teach us not to take such blessings for granted.

At the same time, we sing our honest prayers of sorrow, lamenting the dangerous and destructive power creation sometimes wields. In the midst of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and tornadoes, we look to the maker of heaven and earth for help and hope. An anonymous 1909 setting of Psalm 46 puts it this way: "God is our refuge and our strength, our ever-present aid, and therefore, though the earth be moved, we will not be afraid" (#329). Other songs that acknowledge creation's deadly power are "God of the Sparrow" (#22), "How Firm a Foundation" (#463), and "Give to the Winds Thy Fears" (#815). It is important to name these realities in worship and not to domesticate or romanticize the wildness and chaos of creation. It is also important to consider how human activities may be contributing to the frequency and severity of such disasters.

Present: God Who Is

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace . . ." (Luke 2:14). The coming of Jesus Christ inaugurates God's new creation—already present among us, though not yet realized in the fullness that is to come. By the grace of Christ we see glimpses of God's heavenly realm, like a tiny seed that will grow into a great tree, giving shelter and shade (Luke 13:18–19). Yet we also feel the trembling of the earth itself as the whole creation groans for redemption (Rom. 8:22).

In this time of heavenly promise and earthly peril, the church sings—in the present tense—of creation as both gift and calling. We sing with rejoicing at the life-giving power of God; we sigh with remorse at the careless destruction of creation; we strengthen our resolve to live as good stewards of the world God so loves.

God's Mighty Acts

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is good news for the whole creation—the promise of God's ultimate triumph over all that threatens to hurt or destroy. Indeed, in Charles Wesley's classic 1739 Easter hymn, creation is the first to sing the good news of Jesus' rising from the dead: "'Christ the Lord is risen today!' Alleluia! All creation, join to say: Alleluia! Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, O heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!" (#245). Newer Easter hymns with similar themes include "Now the Green Blade Rises" (#247), "Because You Live, O Christ" (#249), and "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" (#250). Such songs demonstrate our kinship with creation in celebrating the promise of new life in Christ—a testimony of hope in the face of forces that "threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care" ("A Brief Statement of Faith," p. 37).

The Church at Worship

The sacrament of baptism is a sign of our dying and rising with Christ; through the water of baptism we are also immersed in the life and fate of

the whole creation while we are made ready for God's new creation. As a remarkable verse from Psalm 36 says, "your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD" (Ps. 36:6). An unattributed 1909 metrical

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paraphrase of Psalm 36, found in the "Baptism" subsection of *Glory to God*, expresses it this way: "Lord, all thy creatures thou wilt save. Since thou art ever kind, beneath the shadow of thy wings we may a refuge find" (#477). More recent songs that connect baptism with creation and new creation include "Crashing Waters at Creation" (#476), "Out of Deep, Unordered Water" (#484), and "We Know That Christ Is Raised" (#485). The water of the font can be traced to the wellspring and garden of creation (Gen. 2:10); that same water becomes a river of life, flowing from the throne of God (Rev. 22:1). Given these deep currents of connection, our sacramental use of water cannot be separated from our care and concern for the rivers, lakes, and oceans on which all life depends.

Our Response to God

As we seek to be faithful caretakers of God's good creation at this present and precarious moment in history, we would do well to begin with basic biblical principles of stewardship: that the earth and all its creatures belong to the Lord (Ps. 24:1); that all things—including our very lives—come from God and return to God (1 Chr. 29:14). An

1858 hymn by William Walsham How makes a strong affirmation of these principles: "We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee. May we thy bounties thus as stewards true receive, and gladly, as thou blessest us, to thee our first-fruits give" (#708). Newer songs that share this perspective and press toward ecological implications include "Touch the Earth Lightly" (#713), "God of the Fertile Fields" (#714), and "The Earth Belongs to God Alone" (#715). These latter songs, in particular, help the church to confess and lament our lack of care for

creation and recommit ourselves to personal and societal practices of faithful stewardship. They challenge us to confront and address the complex and critical issues that endanger the earth.

Future: God Who Is to Come

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . ." (Rev. 21:1). The faith of the church, founded in Scripture and forged through centuries of witness and worship, assures us that God's creative work continues. We look with hope and longing for the completion of God's saving work and the fulfillment of God's promises: a peaceful kingdom where all creatures dwell in safety (Isa. 11:1–9); a feast of victory at death's final destruction (Isa. 25:6–9); Christ's glorious return and reign of justice, compassion, and peace (Rev. 21:1–6).

In the hope of this new creation, the church sings—in the future tense—of creation redeemed and restored. With the creatures of earth and choirs of heaven, we sing the vision of all things made holy and whole.

God's Mighty Acts

In the grand sweep of the story of salvation, we await the consummation of God's creative

purpose at Christ's glorious return. Like Jesus' resurrection, this will be good news for the whole creation. Ecology and eschatology are interconnected—as John Ross Macduff's 1853 hymn says, "Christ is coming! Let creation from its groans and labor cease; let the glorious proclamation hope restore and faith increase: Christ is coming! Christ is coming! Come, O blessed Prince of peace" (#360). Songs about creation announcing Jesus' return include "My Lord! What a Morning" (#352), "Steal Away" (#358), and "God Reigns! Let Earth Rejoice!" (#365). Signs and wonders in nature—from flowering deserts and flowing streams (Isa. 35:1–10) to fig trees and falling stars (Mark 13:24–37)—have long been associated with the coming of the Messiah.

In Scripture as in song, such images of the transformation of the natural world suggest the nearness of Christ's coming kingdom. Yet the Bible also presents urban images of new creation, depicting the divine realm as a new kind of city (Rev. 22:1–21). Walter Russell Bowie's 1909 hymn, "O Holy City, Seen of John" develops this theme: "Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that has stood too long a dream; whose laws are love, whose ways are servanthood, and where the sun that shines becomes your grace for human good" (#374). As we seek to care for God's whole creation, we must not neglect this vision of the city transformed; indeed, the lives of city dwellers and country creatures are intimately intertwined through such factors as our use of energy, production of food, and disposal of waste.

Certain passages are especially prominent in our understanding of ecology and eschatology. Isaiah's prophecy of a peaceable realm—where the "wolf shall live with the lamb" (Isa. 11:6) and "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:9)—is the basis for a number of newer hymns and songs in *Glory to God*. These include "O Day of Peace" (#373), "We Wait the Peaceful Kingdom" (#378), and "Dream On, Dream On" (#383), all found within the subsection

of the hymnal titled "A New Heaven and a New Earth." By singing this vision of creation renewed and all creatures at peace, we express our longing for God's life-giving grace and our commitment to serve as agents of restoration and reconciliation in Jesus' name.

The Church at Worship

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist, from a Greek word for thanksgiving) is a feast of gratitude for God's grace; it is also intended to be a way of sharing, here and now, in the heavenly banquet that is to come in Christ's eternal realm. The natural, earthy symbols of grain and grapes—transformed into bread and wine—nourish us with the gifts of creation even as they point to God's transforming grace in our lives and in the world. An 1824 hymn text by Josiah Conder conveys this imagery and connects it to Christ through the metaphor of viticulture: "Vine of heaven, thy love supplies this blest cup of sacrifice. . . . Thou our life! O let us be rooted, grafted, built on thee" (#496). We are united with Christ—and thus to the God of all creation—like branches on a vine (John 15:5). More recent Communion hymns take the connection with creation a step further, demonstrating the ecological and ethical implications of the eucharistic meal; some of these include "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ" (#526), "Seed, Scattered and Sown" (#531), and "When at This Table" (#537). Our sacramental use of the fruits of the earth compels us to care for the soil that, by God's grace, nourishes and sustains all life.

Our Response to God

It is easy to feel overwhelmed at the plight of the earth, immobilized in the face of environmental disaster, powerless in the grip of immense economic and ecological forces. Jesus counsels us not to be consumed with worry but to "strive first for the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33). In this same passage (Matt. 6:25–33), Jesus cites the examples

of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, which are kept always in God's loving care. William Cowper echoes this teaching in the poignant 1779 poem that is the basis for the hymn "Sometimes a Light Surprises"; Cowper assures us that the Lord "who gives the lilies clothing will clothe his people, too; beneath the spreading heavens no creature but is fed; and he who feeds the ravens will give his children bread" (#800). Contemporary hymns and songs affirm this abiding hope while also giving voice to our calling to serve God's purpose for creation; some of these in *Glory to God* include "Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples" (#757), "For the Troubles and the Sufferings" (#764), and "For Everyone Born" (#769). Trusting that our future—and the future of the whole creation—is held in God's hands, we seek to be faithful in small things, always looking with hope and joy for the coming of the day when God makes all things new.

On Earth as in Heaven

The first chapter of Genesis describes God's very first words to the freshly made humans: a charge to grow, prosper, and care for the gift of creation (Gen. 1:28–30). This remains our sacred calling: to be faithful stewards of the earth God has made. By so doing, we give honor and glory to the Lord God the Almighty—who was and is and is to come—and live out the prayer that Jesus taught: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Endnote

1. See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 102–8.

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