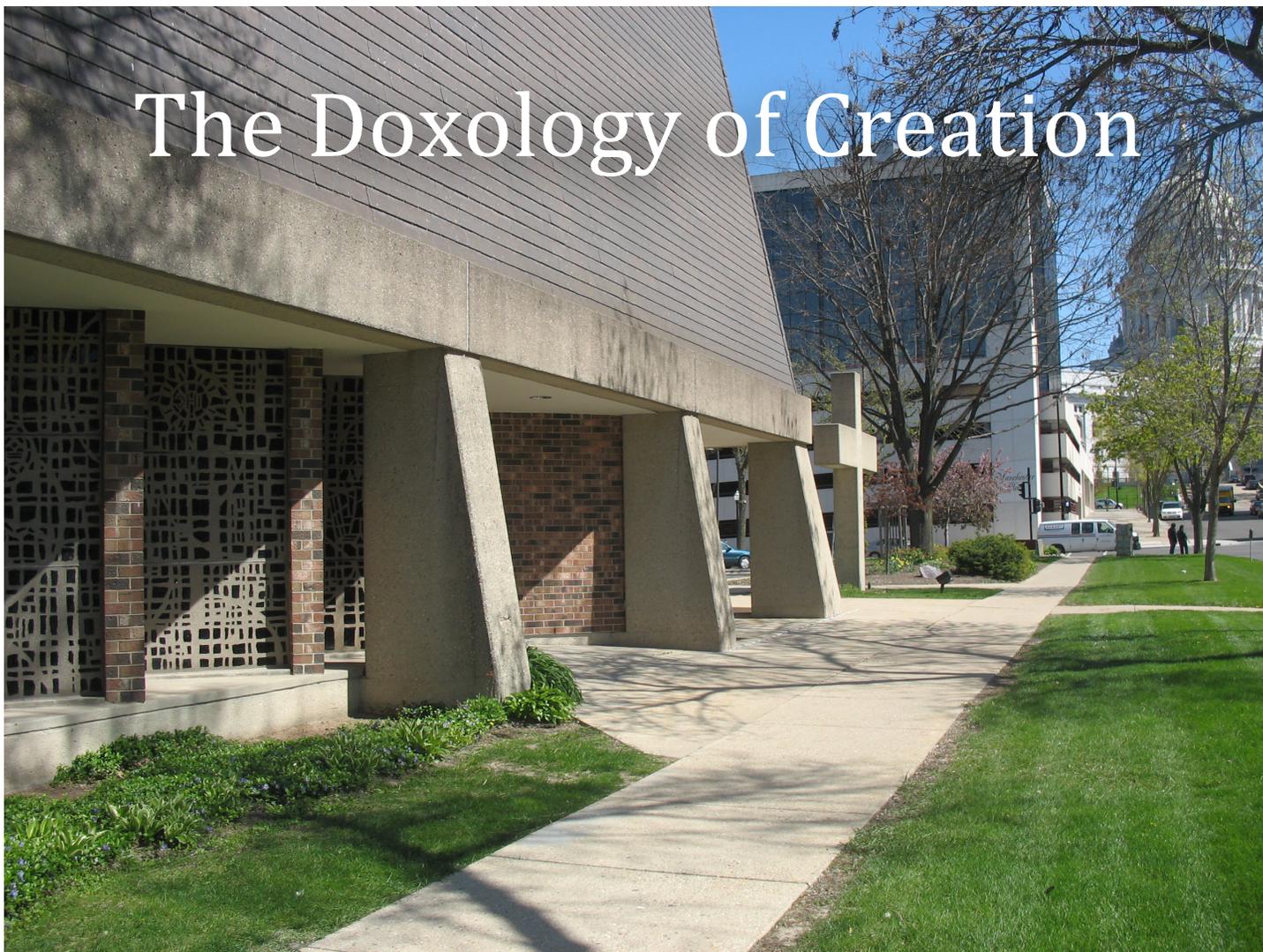


Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, May 1, 2016
Text: Psalm 148

The Doxology of Creation



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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Hallelujah! Psalm 148 is the “Hallelujah Chorus” sung by all of creation. And we discover that “hallelujah” is a transliteration directly borrowed from Hebrew for “praise be to Yahweh.”

The first six verses of Psalm 148 give voice to the “heavens,” all that is “up there.” “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!” Praise him, angels, and sun, moon, and stars. Praise him, the waters above the heavens. Praise him, everything that God has created and overarches us.

And then, the psalmist comes down to earth. “Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps!” Sea monsters . . . the threat to all of life on the open waters, those creatures that lurk just below the surface, including those “monsters” of our own psyches lying just below our comprehension, they praise God. Praise him fire, hail, snow, frost, and wind. Praise him mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and cattle, creeping things, and flying birds. Praise him kings and princes and peasants, male and female, young and old.

And why? Why praise the Lord? Why sing “The Doxology,” “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow”? Because this one who is revered in Psalm 148 is the giver of all life, and even with our complaints and pains and disappointments, when we listen to the world around us we have reason to say “thank you.” It is a call to turn away from our individual selves and experience the creation in a new way, in its fullness and loving embrace.

When we perceive God in the majesty of all creation, we understand that we are not alone. We do not have to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” alone. What a sad sound that would be, the “Hallelujah Chorus” for solo voice. No, this call to sing God’s praises is an invitation to join the choir, to strike up the band, to put our fears and differences aside, and be in tune with our neighbors. And who are our neighbors? “The angels, stars, and sea monsters; widows, orphans, and sojourners; princes and priests. All are there, entering a new world, submitting to a new regime, embracing a new common possibility,” Walter Brueggemann in his essay, *Finally Comes the Poet* (p. 70).

The music of the spheres which we are to play and sing . . . I think that there are four basic instruments that have been used over time to make music all around the world. (I am sure that there are historians of music here today who can be much more sophisticated than what I am about to say. Do not raise your hands now; just tell me what more I need to know at the door after the service.)

There are instruments to strike . . . something as simple as a tambourine or a stretched animal skin, or maybe a bunch of upside down five-gallon plastic containers played by kids on the sidewalk hoping to make a buck or two, or as elaborate as a full drum set . . . instruments with which to beat out a rhythm.

Then, there are instruments with strings that we activate . . . the violin, viola, cello, and the upright bass. There are the humbler versions . . . mandolins, lutes, ukuleles, and guitars. And then, we can include the piano, a glorious invention built on the notion of striking a string of a certain length with a tiny mallet to make a certain sound.

And third, wind instruments, some tube-like construct through which we blow air. The clarinet, with its reed that vibrates in the mouthpiece and the holes along the length that are opened and closed with keys. And then, there are the two reeds of an oboe and the reed-less flute, recorder, and pan flute played up in the Andes Mountains. And, of course, there are all of the brass instruments . . . trumpets, trombones, baritones, French horns, and tubas. All utilize the same idea of blowing air through a cylinder and changing the air pressure with mouth and fingers to make music.

And the fourth instrument, the human voice . . . we all can make music, pleasantly or poorly, but when everything is working right in our throats, we can expel air over our vocal chords to make a sound. (Now, admittedly, there is another whole dimension of sound created electronically that, as yet, has not developed a history.)

But the point: over the millennia people have had ways to make music that, in effect, mimic the music of the spheres, that approximate the sounds of the wind and rain and birds and cattle, and if we listen very closely, the psalmist insists, we also will hear the music of the stars and the mountains and the cedars. And in the making of music we are praising the creator, even if the song is raucous, rowdy, and raunchy. It is easier to make the point, however, when the song is the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Listening to the creation to hear it praise God . . . listening faithfully, learning to appreciate what we often miss because we live such a noisy existence.

My wife, Sally, and I live on Whitewater Lake about an hour southeast of Madison in the Kettle Moraine region. We have a small cedar-sided cottage very close to the lakeshore. We bought it a few decades ago when my folks died and left us some money they did not know they had as a place to which to retire when we no longer lived in a church parsonage. For the final thirteen years of full-time ministry when we lived in the steeple parsonage of the Chicago Temple on Daley Plaza in the heart of the Loop, the lake cottage provided an alternate reality. It was wonderful living on the city’s plaza and having a Picasso statue in the front yard and a Miro in the side yard. There was always something going on across the street . . . the farmers’ market on Thursdays, the Turkish Fest with its whirling dervishes at lunchtime, the Christkindlmarkt for the month before Christmas, “Broadway in Chicago” previews at lunchtime during the summer, and, of course, demonstrations of all kinds for and against just about anything. A lot of noise, a lot of excitement just outside the bedroom window.

So, one night after retirement as we were getting accustomed to living with the quiet of Whitewater Lake, Sally woke me up in the middle of the night. “Do you hear all of that noise out there? What kind of raucous demonstration is going on in the plaza at this hour? Why don’t you get up and see? Wait, don’t bother; it’s the geese.” Learning to listen carefully to God’s creation, and praising God, even for the squawking in the middle of the night. Now, I like geese, though that is tested at three o’clock in the morning. Mark Fowler, who will become the lead pastor at this church in July, says that he loves loons. Take that as you will, but he was referring to the time that he spent as a child at a lake in New England, fascination with the eerie cry of the loon.

I share with you again Wendell Berry’s wonderful poem, “The Peace of Wild Things:”

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests
in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things, peace of wild things,
Who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water
and I feel above the day-blind stars waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, in the grace of the world,
and am free.

Sometimes the music of the spheres can be the silence, and the doxology we sing to praise God sounds in our hearts and minds, not our throats, and that is sufficient. Finding solace, discovering hope by listening to creation.

Another testimony, in poetic form, as well. I thought of “Small Prayer in a Hard Wind” by Christian Wiman as I engaged in conversation this past week. Wiman was the editor of “Poetry” magazine until he was diagnosed with bone cancer. As he has worked his way through strenuous treatments, he has moved to New Haven with his wife and children to become a faculty member at Yale Divinity School. There is nothing sentimental about his poetry; he gives word to the unspoken humanity of his circumstance.

As through a long-abandoned half-standing house
only someone lost could find,
which, with its paneless windows and sagging crossbeams,
its hundred crevices in which a hundred creatures hoard and nest,
seems both ghost of the life that happened there
and living spirit of this wasted place,
wind seeks and sings every wound in the wood
that is open enough to receive it,
shatter me God in my thousand sounds . . .

Our song of praise, our “Doxology,” our “Hallelujah Chorus,” may be “sung” by the wind blowing through our wounds, if we are open enough to receive it. We are not alone in this life; we do not have to sing a solo. We are surrounded by the music of the heavens -- of the angels, stars, sun, and moon, and the music of the earth – the mountains, the seas, the cattle and birds, the trees and flowers, and by one another, princes and peasants alike. We do not have to make music in isolation, but rather listen to the majestic score that envelops us and beckons us forward to “a new common possibility.” Amen.