

“FOR WHOM GOD WAITS”

Psalm 148; Matthew 25:31-45

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This week, as we gather for worship amid the trees of Hanson Grove, we are surrounded by the sounds of birds chirping, leaves rustling as the breezes blow, and even the traffic as it passes the church on West Hills Road. Gathering in the Grove annually for worship is becoming a tradition, and it is especially fitting this week because it seems a perfect conclusion to a week that has seen this sacred space used many times. Remember just seven days ago this space was filled with tables and chairs, salmon was being cooked just over there, and this space was rather loud due to much laughter and many conversations. This past week this space was also used for a Girl Scout training exercise and a Meals on Wheels picnic. It was used during Vacation Bible School when some classes used this space; and the salmon barbeque pit became the perfect location for children and families to gather for s'mores to celebrate the end of the VBS week. This space has well used over the last few days and, thus, it seems appropriate that we gather to formally worship here; because, in all the informal ways that I just mentioned, there has already been worship here.

We gather here today to celebrate what is known in theological circles as Stewardship of Creation Sunday. It is a Sunday set aside to acknowledge the blessed nature of the whole of God's creation and our responsibilities as stewards of that creation. The United Church of Christ suggested our churches hold this celebration on the Sunday closest to Earth Day, in late April. But clearly our Oregon weather would not allow us to worship outdoors in April. Thus, we gather for Stewardship of Creation Sunday in July, at a time when we can generally predict a glorious day like today that allows us to worship in our outdoor haven free from the probability of rain, or in our case, April snows.

For this Sunday I chose two readings on which to focus our deliberations for Stewardship of God's creation. The first reading is Psalm 148 which speaks to us today as we celebrate the creative hand of God and our role in taking care of creation. But even in this relatively straight-forward psalm there is more going on than meets the eye. This psalm is one of the five doxology psalms that conclude the book of Psalms and, as such, singing praise to God is its primary focus. But this psalm offers praise in a rather unique fashion because first we hear praises from the heavens through the first six verses, and then we hear praises from the earth in the next seven verses before the psalm ends with united praise. What I find most interesting about this psalm is the way that heavenly bodies such as the moon and stars, earthly bodies such as animals and humankind, and earthen "bodies" such as fire, snow, and hail, are all accorded the ability to sing praises to God. In this psalm we must suspend our modern view of the universe and imagine that every living thing and, indeed, every thing has the ability to offer praise to God. This psalm is a reminder that all those things created in Genesis 1 remain under the power of God and are not subject to our human understanding of how praise and celebration must happen. Instead, the psalmist reminds us that each part of creation has its contribution to make to the chorus of praise that celebrates the hand of God that has made all things possible.

This passage reminds us that *our human* words of praise are no more valuable than the praises that emanate from the deepest parts of the oceans, from the snowcapped mountains, or from the holy spaces in orchards or in our gardens. Today as we lift our praises so, too, does every plant and animal that we can imagine—and together the chorus we sing is beautiful!

The gospel lesson for today offers what is perhaps one of the most commonly read biblical calls for responsibility for one's neighbor. I remember reading this text in Sunday school as a child and listing the ways we might respond to the poor, the sick, the homeless, and the imprisoned. It was a nice little lesson that has stuck with me for many years. But one of the things that has only just begun to set in with me is a sense that perhaps I missed out on the imperative that Matthew is lifting up in this passage. Matthew reaches the climax of his teaching with this passage and there is an "in the moment" requirement that is present in this passage that I believe we are all too willing to let slide as we interpret this text. In this text we often find our way to hearing the call to take on the missional aspects of the ministry of Jesus—that is, to put together the programs that will feed and clothe people—and those are, without doubt, important programs to put in place. But Jesus isn't trying to set up a social service agency or even a church in this passage; he is trying to remake the priorities of anyone who will hear his message. He is trying to remake their priorities around the simple day-to-day tasks of expressing care for one's neighbor; and, in that way, those whom Jesus would judge as the blessed and the damned are surprised: because it is their simple work or their simple failings that have not gone unnoticed. In this passage Jesus is saying "for you, who have clothed, fed, and visited my people, you will be rewarded."

In re-framing his message in these simple terms and calling upon the individual to be the point of responsibility, Jesus is doing something quite important for us as followers of Jesus and as stewards of God's creation. Simply put, Jesus is saying to all who would listen "God's people need you!"

A few weeks ago I was privileged to hear a man named Van Jones speak at the commencement exercises at the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, where Shauna graduated. Van Jones is the founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, California, where he works on programs such as "Books not Bars" to help young people and families find success in Oakland's inner-city rather than end up incarcerated. He has also started a green-jobs program called "Green for All" that is focused on making the green revolution a social justice tool for connecting all people with green jobs and green technology. In his address, he spoke of his belief that the Holy has been waiting for those who are just now beginning to understand the need for ecological stewardship and the just world that must accompany such a shift. He spoke in words far more eloquent than I can muster of the divine Creator waiting and waiting for those who would nurture the gifts of creation in a way that did justice to the one who created all of us: white and black, rich and poor, citizens of the world rather than citizens of any particular nation. He spoke of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and 40 years of lost possibility; and he spoke of the call and the promise of renewal of a new vision that includes justice and mercy rather than political or financial power. Van Jones spoke of individuals being called.

And that is the message on this Sunday: As Jesus was calling out those who had cared for the poor and visited the imprisoned, he was lifting up the actions of the individual. That is where we must start if we are to take seriously the needs of our world. Stewardship of Creation sounds great as it rolls off the tongue, but it is too big. In both our psalm and in our gospel reading we are reminded that the individual matters. Each of us should then hear these words: God has been waiting for us, for you, in fact! God has been waiting for you to step forward to sit with the sick, and peel vegetables so that the homeless can eat. And God has been waiting for people to finally understand exactly how precious each and every tree and each and every stream and each and every beach truly is in the eyes of God. And God has been waiting for us to love creation with the same amount of love and care that God has always held for us and for creation. Somehow, after years of understanding God's command to "subdue the earth" as an excuse to take as much as we possibly could in the time we have left, something has shifted and the time is now! Now is the time when we can reclaim the gifts that God has given to us as ours: to enjoy and share rather than to own and control. "When you did it to the least of these you did it to me." This means something far different than we have ever conceived if the least of these might be those who live three generations from now with polluted water, or with fossil fuels that have been depleted, or with no ozone layer for protection. If we take this passage to mean what I think it means in ecological terms, then we have to hear Jesus saying this, "When you destroyed the rivers, you did it to me. When you decimated the environment to benefit only you, you did it to me. But when you protected the salmon, you did it to me and when you protect native species, you protected me."

God has waited long enough and God's people have waited long enough; now it is up to us. God is calling each of us to take responsibility for caring for our neighbors and for singing in the chorus of praise for all that God has created and gifted us with upon this great Earthen paradise. The simple truth is, that in environmental terms, we are the ones for whom God has waited, and the next generation cannot wait for us any longer. So, let us join in singing praises to our God and let us accept the call of faithful stewardship that is uniquely ours to bear! Thanks be to God! Amen.