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# The Earth is Full of Your Glory

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*This sermon was preached at St. Luke Church, Chicago, on Sunday, September 27, 2015, at a service preceding the performance of J.S. Bach's Great Catholic Mass, conducted by Dr. Mark Bangert. The event committee asked that the sermon especially address the ecotheological dimensions of the texts and the day. The St. Francis pet blessing also took place in worship. In addition to the lectionary texts (Lectionary 26, 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B) of Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29; James 5:13–20; and Mark 9:38–50, two texts from the ordinary of the mass, the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei were also considered texts for the day.*

Recently a scientist was puzzled because deep in a forest he saw animals dashing for cover long before a hawk came into view and glided over the area. He eventually discovered that birds from miles away were passing along messages through the forest like a telegraph line to warn about hawks and other predators.

It reminded me of “The Twilight Bark” from Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*. Dogs howled and yapped to pass a detailed message all the way across a crowded city. When I saw that movie as a child I remember being filled with wonder thinking about how messages from other animals might be passing through and around us all the time without our knowledge or comprehension—like another dimension of reality.

That’s what happened in real life to those scientists under the forest canopy. As their research advanced, there were three things that especially blew their minds: First, they found that the daisy chain of birdcalls was travelling across the forest at speeds of up to 100 miles per hour. Second, some of the birdcalls actually described the type and size of bird that was approaching (and scientists say they have only begun to translate this complex language). And third, it’s not simply chickadees communicating with chickadees. Robins and starlings can understand, too. The scientists said they have observed squirrels that can understand these warnings. Some squirrels have even learned to speak these birdcalls themselves, adding their voices to the Twilight Bark.<sup>1</sup> (With the pet blessing today, it makes me wonder what the cats are saying about church this morning.)

As other scientists use the Hubble telescope to peer far into the universe for signs of life, these scientists are saying that we are like infants here on earth, just beginning to understand the languages chattering all around us.

Today in this service, and later this afternoon in the performance of Bach’s *Great Catholic Mass*, we will sing the *Sanctus*, when every creature on earth and in heaven is not only chattering but lifting their voices to join a great song of praise. *And so with earth and sea and all their creatures, with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, we* (humans along with all the others) *praise God’s name and join their unending hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy. Heaven and earth are full of God’s glory.*<sup>2</sup>

To God who has unfurled the galaxies, in the *Sanctus* now every creature sings praise to the One who has formed us all. And we humans, very much newcomers to the song, join their unending hymn, which was begun, the book of Job says, at the *foundation of the earth, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly bodies shouted for joy.*<sup>3</sup> What we say about the *Sanctus*—that everything in heaven and on earth is praising God and that we can hear and join this song—is a great mystery that is often hidden from our eyes.

But maybe you have had glimpses of this vision. Have you ever slipped out from under the big canopy of city lights, and stood in deep darkness under the Milky Way? Maybe you sensed that the stars were singing together—and that your own wonder joined their song.

Or have you ever been astonished looking at the city at night, with the skyscrapers reaching up, the El [Chicago’s Elevated Train] sliding through the air above the cars, while the boats on the water glide under sidewalk bridges where the people walk: so much energy, joy, and pain mixed together like one great prayer? Or, maybe on a run on the lakeshore here in Chicago, or on a morning in a national park or some other wild place, have you experienced the miracle of just being alive on a planet with great lakes, where flocks of birds fly, and food grows from the soil, and a moon—with craters we can see!—hangs above us? Now and then, we have moments—glimpses—when all of it seems to be one great prayer, the whole place and every creature looking to God, singing, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. The *Sanctus* says that that song

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1. Christopher Solomon, “When Birds Squawk, Other Species Seem to Listen,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/science/decoding-the-cacophony-of-birds-warning-calls.html>.

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2. For the ecumenical text of the *Sanctus* used in this service and in wide ecumenical use, see English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). “Praying Together,” 1988. <http://englishtexts.org/Portals/11/Assets/praying.pdf>.

3. Job 38:4a, 7, NRSV, adapted.

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## These scriptures challenge religious folks to listen for the song of the *Sanctus*—or the voice of God—in places we might be surprised to hear it.

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is *unending*. The *Sanctus* says that that vision is *true: heaven and earth are full of God's glory*.

But the scripture texts we read today address the reason we describe these visions as glimpses. Because many times it is not obvious that there is any great unending hymn. Today's texts highlight times when ears are closed and voices are silenced—when this song comes from voices that aren't expected or appreciated. Eldad and Medad prophesy from among the people rather than at the religiously sanctioned tent. The disciples get upset because someone is healing people in Christ's name but hasn't asked their permission. In both cases, these scriptures challenge religious folks to listen for the song of the *Sanctus*—or the voice of God—in places we might be surprised to hear it. Maybe in the places where we'd even try to silence it.

I think that's what all of that awful violent language is about in the Gospel. Millstones around necks and limbs hacked away. It's phrased in graphic, over-the-top, cartoon hyperbole, but the point seems to be that anything that keeps you from hearing the song from this *little one* or from *the least of these*—no matter how precious the impediment seems—*tear it out* so you can hear and join the song with all God's creatures, including those that surprise us. The text seems to say: don't let any precious possessions keep you from the song.

What would keep us from that song? What would get in the way of us hearing and joining that song? Where does the great hymn of praise, or the voice of God get shut down for you? This week I've been listening to Pope Francis challenge us to hear the divine voice that bears witness through the non-human creation. And he's challenged us to listen deeply to other humans, especially the voices of those of us who have been pushed to the margins of power. I've been challenged this week to ask how to open my ears to these hymns and cries, and how to add my voice to the song.

Where is it for you? What would that be for our world? What could open our ears to hear, and our lips to join this song?

In the book of Isaiah, where the first part of the *Sanctus* text originates, Isaiah finds his own voice shut down when in his vision he stands before God and hears that great hymn of *Holy, Holy, Holy*. He says, *Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips*. In the vision one of the angels singing the *Sanctus* flies to Isaiah with a burning coal from the altar. (Did you notice even an angel needs to use tongs?) The angel touches Isaiah's mouth with it. And the angel says, *now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out*. And with that burning coal, Isaiah's lips are opened to prophecy (and presumably to join the

great song). What enabled Isaiah to join the song, the text says, is the coal of mercy, the coal of grace.

When has the coal of mercy touched your lips? For many of us today, we are aware of the mercy given and received across the boundary of species in the relationship we have with our pets. Many of them are here with us today. Instead of being lonely, or instead of brutality and violence, we have the gift of exchanging mercy with these other-than-human-creatures who have become members of our family. We greet each other with affection when we get home. We include their hungers and delights in our grocery budget.

Though scientists are just beginning to help us translate animal speech, we have all probably seen a lot of communication going back and forth freely between people and their pets. We speak baby talk to them. It may not be a stretch to say that through these pets, the coal of mercy touches our lives. We even bring them to church to join the song. These pets, these fellow creatures, help us hear the song sung by every creature everywhere, praising God for mercies far and wide.

Classic Christian imagery says that the eucharist, the bread and wine of communion received on our lips, is also like that burning coal of mercy. In another example of inter-species imagery, Jesus comes to us in the eucharist as the Lamb of God. This lamb has been wounded, slain, but comes to us in mercy, and takes away the sin of the world. (The Greek says that the sin of the "cosmos" is taken away.) In this image, Jesus looks like a wounded animal who does not strike us down, but, by grace, forgives and heals. The burning coal of mercy we receive in communion is a sign of the mercy that God sends everywhere—even to us who wound our fellow creatures. Jesus is like a wounded lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Mercy flows and pours through the stars, through Lake Michigan, through our pets, to the poor, to the dying, to us. The coal of mercy is what helps us find our voice, and helps us hear the song of the *Sanctus* resounding all around us. From mountaintops, along lakeshores, on the El, around this table. Every time we join the song of the *Sanctus*, we join it because the gift of mercy has touched our lips.

The *Sanctus* says: the coal of mercy opens the voice of the whole universe to sing. It is the secret language that passes between us and our pets. The coal of mercy opens our ears to hear the voices of the others.

*And so, with angels and archangels, with the cats and the seagulls, with the sequoias and the stars, the dogs and dolphins, with people in every language and in every place, with the gift of mercy on our lips, we praise God's name and join the unending hymn.*

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