Soundscapes and Faith

Gilson Waldkoenig

The Paulssen-Hale-Maurer Chair and Professor of Church in Society
Lutheran Theological Seminary
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Director, Town and Country Church Institute

The gospel we speak and enact in ministry echoes in God's good creation. By means of grace given by Christ, we join God's creative song, harmonizing with ecological communities of God's making. But noise mars perception, inhibits listening, and confuses us. Noise is a huge problem for Lutherans and other Christians who believe that "faith comes from what is heard" (Romans 10:17).

Naturalists have recently been listening intently and recording soundscapes, racing before species depletion and habitat loss silence many voices. Soundscapes can teach us about sorting sound life from noise. Traditions of music and liturgy also belong to soundscapes. This paper aims to encourage those who preach, teach, and sing the good news of Jesus Christ that the means of grace resonate in soundscapes of God's creation. Despite noise and harm to God's creation, God's grace resounds with God's good intent in all creation.

Introduction: Flight calls

A few years ago, I took a group of seminarians to visit an avian research center, where ornithologists study birds, at the Powdermill Nature Preserve, a rural outpost of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.[1] Every morning the staff at the avian research center capture some birds, safely and without hurting them. They hold them briefly to make a record of the species observed and to take a few measurements. We stood with wide eyes as the experts handled the birds, and we got to see some lovely birds up close.

One of the ornithologists at that research center, Dr. Amy Tegeler, welcomed us into her laboratory. She told us about a special research project on "flight calls." Not bird songs, but flight calls. No one knew that flight calls existed until the 1970s. Some ornithologists decided to put microphones on long sticks pointed into the sky, and to run a tape recorder for hours on end. When

This paper aims to encourage those who preach, teach, and sing the good news of Jesus Christ that the means of grace resonate in soundscapes of God's creation. Despite noise and harm to God's creation, God's grace resounds with God's good intent in all creation.

they listened to their recordings, they found tiny blips of sound the birds made when flying at night. To the human ear the blips of sound were indistinguishable from one another. However, when personal computers became available ornithologists began to analyze the little blips of sound digitally. They made graphs of the calls, and they slowed down the recordings until they began to hear that the flight calls were very different from each other.

Dr. Tegeler played some slowed-down flight calls for our group of learners and showed us striking differences in digital graphs of various calls. Then she showed us a small recording booth. In it, she played flight calls to different birds and recorded responses. In this way, Dr. Tegeler and a few other scientists were slowly decoding flight calls. They were finding which calls were made by different species, and what kind of information they might be transmitting. Flight calls, they were finding, were important in-flight communication during migration.

It occurred to our group that we were getting a glimpse and hearing an echo of a realm of intelligible communication that was completely unknown to humans until only a few years ago. Awe broke over us. We were receiving an earthly analog for our theological sense that there is communication outside of us, apart from us. There are messages we have not yet heard that we might hear someday. And there is intelligibility that we have not yet begun to learn. Learning about flight calls inspired me to learn

1. "Surveilling the Birds: A tour of the longest continuously running bird banding station in the U.S." by Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley in *The Atlantic,* July 11, 2013 https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/surveilling-the-birds/277650/ accessed 5.23.23

more about soundscapes. There was much more to hear than we knew. Often, we stopped listening. Along the way, I found stimulating connections to faith. I come from one of the traditions that claimed, "faith comes through hearing," a phrase borrowed from St. Paul in Romans 10:17. I wanted to learn to listen better and broader.

In the article below I introduce soundscapes (Section I) and then consider our inattention to soundscapes amid increasing noise (Section II). Then I turn to a practical example of faith integrated with soundscape which happened in the twilight between pre-modern and modern times (Section III). The example tells us about what could be possible beyond our increasingly limited range of hearing. I conclude (Section IV) with practical ideas for connecting to soundscapes today. Overall, my aim is to affirm that Christian faith has been and is much closer to God's creation than our inattentiveness would seem to indicate.

Before proceeding further into this article, however, a necessary word about "hearing." Some people "hear" without sound waves bouncing off ear drums. People who experience hearing impairment or deafness nevertheless perceive their environments in ways that are valuable and instructive. And people with hearing loss, impairment, or deafness can certainly hear the Word of God. I acknowledge that the subject I have been investigating, and my approach, are limited to the kind of hearing that I experience. Too often conventional "hearing" becomes a privilege that excludes and diminishes those who hear by different routes. I believe I'm only scratching the surface from my limited perspective; and all who take conventional hearing for granted have a lot to learn from people who hear in different ways. Words like "hearing, sound, voices" and related terms all have meaning beyond the limited perspective of conventional "hearing."

I: Soundscapes

Flight calls are just one example from a vast amount of data concerning natural soundscapes that is today being recorded and studied as never before. Bernie Krause is a leader in the field of soundscape recording. Krause calls himself "a bioacoustician—a collector and student of wildlife sounds." Krause began recording in the woods in 1968, when he was just a boy armed with a tape recorder. Krause tells the story and introduces the field of soundscapes in his book *Voices of the Wild: Animal Songs, Human Din, and the Call to Save Natural Soundscapes*.[2]

Krause has over 5,000 hours of habitat recordings from a lifetime of collecting. He says that over half of them represent

A library of soundscapes would provide standards against which noisy situations might be assessed and corrected. And if some habitats are ever to be restored, even partially, recordings of the soundscape will provide crucial guidance.

landscapes that have been badly compromised by destruction or human noise. The recordings reveal how things used to sound but no longer sound. Krause and others are racing to record as much as they can to compile a reference library of soundscapes. A library of soundscapes would provide standards against which noisy situations might be assessed and corrected. And if some habitats are ever to be restored, even partially, recordings of the soundscape will provide crucial guidance. Krause tells his students that "A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a natural soundscape is worth a thousand pictures." [3]

Krause acknowledges that people throughout history listened and responded in their environments for practical and spiritual reasons.[4] Some environmentalists are now insisting that Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is important alongside scientific, technical ecology. TEK is the place-based insight and wisdom about specific habitats that comes only from the cultures of people who lived in the place for a long time. In addition to TEK, there are other deeply rooted cultural connections to soundscapes according to some ethnomusicologists concerned with the ecological plight of our planet.[5]

There are "three primary acoustic sources that make up a typical soundscape," according to Krause. The first is "geophony," which is "the non-biological natural sounds produced in any given habitat." For most of the earth's history there was no sound except waves, water, wind, rocks, and thunder. The second source of acoustics in a soundscape is "biophony," which is "the collective sound produced by all living organisms that reside in a given biome." The third source Krause calls "anthropophony, or all of the sounds we humans generate." Krause thinks increasing noise is erasing the possibility to hear biophonic and geophonic sound,

2. Krause, *Voices of the Wild* (Yale 2015), 4. For a fuller introduction to soundscape ecology, Krause recommends on page 10 a book by Almo Farina, *Soundscape Ecology: Principles, Patterns, Methods, and Applications* (2014). In the 1970s, R. Murray Schafer "coined the word soundscape to refer to the multiple sources of sound that reach the human ear." Krause added "ecology" to make it "soundscape ecology" because he wanted to include new ways of evaluating the environments "mostly through their collective voices." Krause, *Voices of the Wild*, 8, 18.

3. Krause, *Voices of the Wild*, 26, 29, 7.

4. In considering the effects of anthropophony on wild soundscapes, Krause says that "the biophonies and geophonies of the forest likely spoke to us as 'spirit voices,' mysterious utterances unexplained by any known logic of those emergent times," 44. Krause calls for study of impact of "acoustic references from pre-biblical times to the present," 144.

5. John H. McDowell, et al., *Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change* (University of Illinois, 2021).

and we simply don't know what we're missing. Anthropophony is threatening the geophony and biophony.[6]

II: Noise mars hearing

Noise pollution was identified as a problem even before soundscapes and soundscape ecology emerged. In 1972, Congress passed the Noise Control Act, which established the Office of Noise Abatement and Control (ONAC) in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). It was, Krause said, "the sole federal agency charged with promoting a quieter, less harried America." The ONAC was severely de-funded by Secretary James Watt in the Reagan Administration. Watt said, "Noise is power. The noisier we are as a country, the more powerful we appear to others." Congress in 2003 tried to revive the spirit of the Noise Control Act by passing the Quiet Communities Act; but it was never implemented. The National Park Service started a "Natural Soundscapes Program" in 2001, but funding was soon diverted. Meanwhile, artists, musicians and writers are keenly aware of bioacoustics, and they bring soundscapes into their work. Sensitive interpreters lament the industrial din and noise that affects our non-human neighbors and mars our experience of places. David Haskell is a scientist at the University of the South who, like Krause, raises awareness of the problem of noise. Haskell's book *Sounds Wild and Broken: Sonic Marvels, Evolution's Creativity, and the Crisis of Sensory Extinction* gives a sweeping survey of sound, singing, and music in the context of evolution, and then raises alarm about the damage we are doing to the world, and to ourselves, with all the noise we are making.[7]

The age of increasing noise came on the heels of dramatic change in perspectives about hearing and believing over the last 300 years. Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt wrote a book titled *Hearing Things* that tracks those changes. Skeptics of religion since the Enlightenment debunked religious claims about revelations or supernatural messages. During the same time, however, religious people increased claims of revelations, voices, and communication from unseen sources, supernatural beings, and deceased people. By the late nineteenth century, American society was awash in rituals and dramatizations by both sides. The religious were flocking to revivals, holding seances, and thrilling to special revelations from Ellen Gould White, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Joseph Smith, or others. The skeptics, however, gathered in ventriloquism shows, where the skill of "throwing your voice" gave a naturalistic explanation for "hearing things." Stethoscopes made bodies less mysterious and diminished claims that bodies contained souls. Rationalists even hailed the invention of the telephone to be a technological replacement for old claims to hearing voices.[8]

The Word has elements: air, breath, and soundwaves. Just as baptism has water and the Word, and holy communion has bread, wine, and Word, so, too, speaking and listening have elements with the Word. For many Christians, the Word encountered by ordinary means is how "faith comes through hearing."

Hyper-spiritualized claims from religious people became more widespread than they had been before the Enlightenment, as if many religious people doubled down against rationalistic skepticism. It came with a price, however. "The very proliferation of angelic speech," Schmidt wrote, "was another victory for the modern privatization and fragmentation of religious authority," because "people all had their own angels."[9] Skeptics of religion could step back from the cacophony of religious claims to watch them compete endlessly with each other. But they could not make them go away. The religious sang and prayed more and more loudly and fervently. But neither could they dislodge the skepticism nor make it go away.

In the wake of that history, people of faith had a dilemma: get loud or get cowed. "Cowed" means to acquiesce in the diminishment of "hearing things." In attempts to avoid getting cowed, some Christians got loud. Many of the most outspoken and publicly recognized types of Christianity today feature claims to revelation and knowledge that purport to be above or beyond science and the world known by common means.

Many Christians, however, are not drawn to special claims to revelation but to the steady pulse of the Word and sacraments in traditional form. Volume is not essential, but hearing is. When the Word is shared through mutual conversation, teaching, and preaching, it happens by borrowing air from the atmosphere, just like when we breathe. As we pull air into our lungs and expel it back out, our mouths shape the breath to vibrate the air between speaker and listener. Ear drums vibrate and brains sort signals. The Word has elements: air, breath, and soundwaves. Just as baptism has water and the Word, and holy communion has bread, wine, and Word, so, too, speaking and listening have elements with the Word. For many Christians, the Word encountered by ordinary means is how "faith comes through hearing."

6. Krause, *Voices of the Wild,* 11-13. Caspar Henderson in *A Book of Noises: Notes on the Auraculous* (University of Chicago, 2023) adds the category "cosmophony" alongside the other three types given by Krause.

7. Krause, *Voices of the Wild,* 50, 56, 142, 79. David Haskell, *Sounds Wild and Broken: Sonic Marvels, Evolution's Creativity, and the Crisis of Sensory Extinction* (Penguin, 2022).

8. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard, 2000).

9. Schmidt, *Hearing Things,* 244.

In the Reformation, Martin Luther set out to preach the good news of the free gift of God's grace. He believed that by hearing that Word people would obtain and sustain faith. Hearing was a way of receiving the free gift of God's grace *instead* of works in the penitential system of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church. While we are not capable of rightly hearing and rightly believing on our own, according to Luther, yet we receive a gift of faith by hearing the gospel.

Luther and other Protestants after him also hoped to see results of faith, and their expectations were disappointed. Luther became bitter when the evangelical preaching he advocated garnered mixed results. Lutherans and other Protestants after Luther made moves to deal with what they were seeing: that sometimes preaching seemed to work, and sometimes not. Some Protestants emphasized doctrine or right teaching to bolster preaching. Some emphasized church order and authority to regulate both preachers and hearers. And others turned to the heart or spirit, emphasizing true belief which they understood to be good reception.

Today preaching and teaching confront waves of messaging designed to entice and manipulate responses: to buy something; or to become outraged about something; or to elicit some emotion that makes us malleable for some agenda. Into a cacophony of competitive messaging come sermons, songs, and liturgies. Listeners sort messages while industrial din swells. Modern architecture, including churches, tries to keep out noise. But as we protect ourselves from noise, we also wall off natural soundscapes. We are in an ironic spiral because our increasing efforts to escape noise decrease our exposure to the very sounds against which noise first intruded. And all the while, we are filling our ears with our own messages, diminishing our range of perception for a Word that would come from outside of us.[10]

One theologian who is sensitive to increasing noise and aware of threatened soundscapes is Lisa Dahill. She envisioned "bio-*Theo*acoustics" and recommended that we pray outdoors. She called for "listening, in sustained and ritually central ways, to the actual voices of other species and forces of creation," and for "broadening the scope of our attention beyond the human world, to…. the Word incarnate" in Earth. In Dahill's analysis, human noise is more than mere interference or static. Dahill linked the human noise that is invasive and damaging to creation to a problem that the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "abstraction." Bonhoeffer was a theologian in the mid-twentieth century in Germany. He opposed the Nazi regime and was imprisoned and killed for that opposition. Bonhoeffer was keenly aware that persecuted Jews and non-Aryan people in Nazi Germany were *real;* their sufferings were real; their voices were real. But most Germans and most Christians either avoided or aided the oppression of their neighbors. Bonhoeffer called it "abstraction" when people lived in a constant mode of turning away and living as if suffering neighbors were not there. In addition to hearing voices of human neighbors who suffer, Dahill argues, Christians should hear creation and non-human neighbors who suffer. Abstraction happens when we humans take either a naive and idealized view of the natural world, or when we demonize the world and other species.[11]

In addition to hearing voices of human neighbors who suffer, Dahill argues, Christians should hear creation and non-human neighbors who suffer. Abstraction happens when we humans take either a naive and idealized view of the natural world, or when we demonize the world and other species.

Since increasing noise dulls our listening, it would help us to have an example against which we could compare our time and our experience. There was a time before industrial, human-made noise was at the high levels it is today. Christian experience and faith were integrated with soundscapes. We can ask the question: What are we missing when we live amid human noise and no longer have the sonic sensitivity that many ancestors had?

III: Faith integrated in soundscape, an example

A book titled *Moravian Soundscapes* by ethnomusicologist Sarah Justina Eyerly offers a profile of the sonic world of Eyerly's Moravian ancestors in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century. Although we cannot directly hear what eighteenth century Moravians heard, Eyerly constructed a sonic portrait on a website that complements the book. Eyerly's depiction of the sonic world of eighteenth-century Moravians provides a baseline against which we may compare today's noisy situation.[12]

Like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Lutheran churches throughout the world, the Moravian Church affirms the Augsburg Confession. In 1999, the Moravian Church and the ELCA adopted a full-communion statement titled, "Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion." Moravian roots are in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries when a pastor and theologian in Prague named Jan Hus preached against abuses of the Roman Church. For that he was summoned to the

10. Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation In a Culture of Violence* (Eerdmans, 2005) reckons with the problem that preaching is a performance of words competing for attention with so many other messages.

11. Lisa Dahill, "Bio-Theoacoustics: Prayer Outdoors and the Reality of the Natural World" in *Dialog* 52 (4), 292-302.

12. Sarah Justine Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes: A Sonic History of the Moravian Missions in Early Pennsylvania* (Indiana University, 2020). The website to complement the text sonically: https://moraviansoundscapes.music.fsu.edu/, accessed 1.28.24.

Council of Constance in 1415, where he was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. In reference to that murder, Martin Luther said at Leipzig that “it is contrary to the Spirit to burn heretics.” That statement was specifically censured in the papal bull that led to Luther’s excommunication and condemnation.

Three hundred years after Hus, in 1722, a refugee band of Hussites escaped persecution in their native Moravia to take shelter in Saxony on the estate of Count Nicholas Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf. They founded a settlement called Herrnhut. In that place the faithful and their new leader, Zinzendorf, experienced a religious revival. The re-born Church became very active in mission. It was at a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate, England, in 1738 when John Wesley felt his heart to be “strangely warmed,” setting off a major wave in the Evangelical Revival of that era. To Pennsylvania, Zinzendorf and a group of Moravians came in 1741. They founded the town of Bethlehem in the Delaware River Valley, and from there launched missions into Penn’s Woods.

Author Sarah Eyerly had an ancestor named Johann Jackson Eyerly Jr., who took a trip across thickly wooded Pennsylvania in 1794. He traveled from Bethlehem in the East to Moravian villages in the Allegheny and Ohio Valleys to the West. Johann Eyerly kept a journal of observations about the landscape and the natural soundscape. In her study, Sarah Eyerly supplemented the evidence from the journal with perspective on the practices, beliefs, and worldview of eighteenth-century Moravians. Sarah Eyerly aimed to construct a narrative “that acknowledges past legacies and traumas, and that moves forward to chart new stories that are inclusive and honest.”[13]

Eyerly described life in early Bethlehem and the Moravian Soundscape that shaped everyday life. Until the 1760s Bethlehem was a closed conventual community. Non-Moravians could come into town for business during the day, but the gates were closed at sunset. Some Native Americans who became Moravians lived as equals in Bethlehem. “The process of becoming Moravian,” Eyerly wrote, “allowed Native Christians considerable space to develop indigenized forms of Christianity and music-making.” In 1745 singing could have been heard in thirteen languages. Eyerly acknowledges that European Moravians imposed beliefs and practices and were part of the overall colonization by Europeans. But, she says, Native Moravians determined their own practices and raised their own voices to sing and pray on par with other Moravians.[14]

Connections between faith and soundscapes that Eyerly identified in her well-researched and well-written work, may be summarized in three categories: (1) that music organized community life; (2) Moravian belief in the power of sound; and (3) Moravian practices of hymn singing.

First, all aspects of community life were organized by music. Eyerly called Bethlehem and the other Moravian towns “singing utopias” which were completely out of sync with the mounting conquest and destruction around them. The singing utopias, Eyerly says, are a tantalizing reminder of what “might have been.” Moravian communities were organized around a schedule of devotions and prayer, with constant singing and listening. Before and after every meal there was singing. At seven o’clock: devotions with singing. Then choirs met—everyone was assigned to a choir not only for singing but also for small group discussion and accountability. The community reassembled for the “Evening Hour,” which was a “Singing Hour.” At bedtime, choirs took turns on “Night Watch.” They sang and prayed all night long so that the community was in constant prayer and singing.[15]

Second, faith and soundscape were woven together under the Moravian belief in the power of sound. To wit, Eyerly wrote:

> Moravians shared a belief in the power of sound to shape religious community. All community members sang hymns throughout the day and improvised new hymns as a demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s action in their lives. The acoustic environment of Bethlehem framed the lives of Moravian Christians. What you could hear and how you could sing were important aural marks of communal belonging. Sound was an expression of religious, social, and spatial identity.[16]

Moreover, Eyerly wrote, “Singing had the potential to connect community members directly with the Holy Spirit. There was little separation between the material and spiritual, the human and non-human. Through song, buildings, fields, and forests became sounded, sacred spaces.

“Moravians believed,” Eyerly added, “that the vibrations of music had the power to transcend the boundaries of the spiritual world and call to deceased members of the community.” This was not “spiritualism” such as became popular in the nineteenth century when spiritualists held seances. Rather, the Moravians had a robust sense of the communion of saints. To sing within the covenanted Moravian community on earth was simultaneously to

Eyerly wrote, “Singing had the potential to connect community members directly with the Holy Spirit. There was little separation between the material and spiritual, the human and non-human. Through song, buildings, fields, and forests became sounded, sacred spaces.”

13. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 5.
14. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 15-16, 136, 193.
15. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 117, 218.
16. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 108.

sing with the deceased of the church. To the Moravians, singing with Christ on earth was communion with Christ on earth and in heaven, and all the saints with him.[17] Moravian revelries that crossed earth and heaven were "holy transformative alchemy," Eyerly said. Singing brought God's voice forward in everyday life. Sound had power, Eyerly wrote, "to change the nature of both the body and the spirit through a kind of vibrational alchemy." There were "transformative effects of Christian song."[18]

The third type of connection between faith and soundscape was in Moravian practices of hymn singing. Hymns were in all aspects of Moravian life and were the "embodied theology" of the Moravians, Eyerly said. In the singing meetings called *Singstunden* there were hymn sermons given by worship leaders who might be clergy or lay people emerging from the choirs. The leader would improvise on a hymn, to declare a teaching or message. Some singing sermons were in native languages. Eyerly noted that a corpus of about twenty chorale tunes facilitated the creation of new hymn texts during *Singstunde*.[19]

Especially in choir meetings, there was a quiet meditative approach to singing. They sang quietly while lying face-down on choir house floors, channeling the divine into one's body. Moravians called the singing of other churches "shouting," including Lutheran and Reformed hymnal singing. Moravians did have hymnals and used them alongside scripture for instruction. But communal singing was an oral-aural activity, with heads up and listening both to one another and the vibrations of heaven. While Moravians taught organ, flute, and brass instruments, they were used at special occasions; instrumentation complemented the primarily oral-aural practice of hymn singing.[20]

When a Moravian died, there was an *Einsingen* to usher the deceased from the earthly community into the communion of saints in heaven. The soundscape of earth was seamlessly part of the soundscape of heaven. And all the singing in the community of the church on earth made one ready for a good transition into the church in heaven.[21] Moravians felt especially close to heaven by singing even in the dark primeval forest of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. Many ecstatic improvised hymns were composed in the forest and then sent back to the community at Bethlehem. Moravian song resonated with sacred spaces in mountains and forests, its animals, and insects, Eyerly observed. In contrast to a "German town dominated by hymns and bells of its Lutheran church," Native and European Moravians in Pennsylvania were surrounded by forest and Manitou, the Native sense of the sacred power in the forest.[22]

While Moravians certainly sang to feel protected from wilderness, Eyerly observed, they also expected spiritual encounter in the wilderness. The church that valued its renewal at Herrnhut

When a Moravian died, there was an *Einsingen* to usher the deceased from the earthly community into the communion of saints in heaven. The soundscape of earth was seamlessly part of the soundscape of heaven. And all the singing in the community of the church on earth made one ready for a good transition into the church in heaven.

expected the ecstatic encounter to continue in Pennsylvania. Moravian leader Count Zinzendorf in 1742 crossed the Kittatinny Mountains into dense forest, becoming one of the first Europeans to go north and west of those mountains. The community at Bethlehem eagerly awaited the inspired hymns that he sent back.[23]

By the 1760s Bethlehem shifted from a closed covenantal community to a conventional settlement open to non-Moravians, for economic reasons. After Zinzendorf died in 1760, creditors demanded to be paid. The landscape all around was becoming commodified, Eyerly observed. The primeval forests were destroyed. Possession of land by whites brought with it racist views against Native communalism and suspicion about Moravian communalism. A window of opportunity was closing against indigenous equality, too. Some Native Moravians had lived in the choir houses at Bethlehem, but now they went to a nearby settlement. The "singing utopias" at Bethlehem and other Moravian villages were coming to an end. Daily singing moved into family households instead of the communal regimen; and lost intensity, Eyerly said. By 1823 there was a transition away from oral-aural and improvised singing to dependence on written hymn books. Moravians adopted worship forms of other churches.[24]

The end of the golden era of Moravian soundscapes was marked by a horrible massacre at a Native Moravian village called Gnadenhutten, in the Ohio Valley. In March 1782, a mob of 160 white men killed 96 Native Moravians, including children, women, and men. Imprisoned, the Moravians sang psalms and hymns in Moravian custom all night long before their murder in the morning. "It was through their songs that the Native martyrs had achieved, in the Moravian cosmology, a good death," wrote Eyerly. But at Gnadenhutten, the singing of the Moravian Christians was not recognized to be the song of fellow Christians by the assailants.[25]

17. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 155-156, 116, 171.
18. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 167, 172, 175.
19. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 22-23, 25, 163.
20. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 120, 140, 131, 173.
21. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 153.
22. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 159, 155.
23. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 52, 67-72.
24. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 199, 195, 197, 126, 200-201.
25. Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes,* 96, 9, 216.

IV: Practical steps

In the mid-twentieth century, a monk and a writer named Thomas Merton described an evening he spent in a small cabin under a rainstorm. The rain, he wrote, "fills the woods with an immense and confused sound." A flat roof on the cabin and its little porch drummed with "insistent and controlled rhythms," rhythms of the non-human, un-engineered world which Merton realized he had "not yet learned to recognize." He said that he sloshed through soaked field and woods to arrive at the cabin. He prayed Vespers. His oatmeal supper boiled over while he was lost in listening to the rain. It was "a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor," Merton wrote. He contemplated the rain as a kind of "speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water," and eroding a bare hillside.

Merton shared his experience in an essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros:"

> What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows!

Merton observed that, "Nobody started it," and "nobody is going to stop it." He thought, "It will talk as long as it wants, this rain." And he decided that, "As long as it talks, I am going to listen."[26]

I find two practical ideas in this passage for how we might draw closer to listen in natural soundscapes. The first practical idea comes from the fact that Merton went outdoors to hear the soundscape, or close enough to it in the little cabin. It is just as Dr. Dahill recommended when she called for bio-theoacoustics. She recommended that we could pray outdoors more. To make that move puts our hearing and faith into a resonant context of God's creation. We are in the context of God's creation indoors or out but given the modern context of increasing human noise it makes a difference to go outside, or almost outside in a cabin, to say Vespers or other prayers, and to listen. When and where can we worship outdoors? During the pandemic a lot of congregations worshipped outside. Most of those went no further than the length of an extension cord, into their parking lots or lawn. But it was outside. What would it be like to go further into the outdoors, beyond the end of our electrical cords, with our digital devices turned off, to listen for both the creation and the creator?

A. Terra Divina

Victoria Loorz is author of the book *Church of the Wild.*[27] One of her suggestions is a practice she calls *Terra Divina.* It begins by looking for a wild place that "is calling to you." It doesn't have to be deep wilderness or an extreme location. It might be a patch of wild, a remnant of field or forest, in between human-built structures. Perhaps a stream or a rock in a city park. Or it could be a more remote place if people have such options in a rural setting. Loorz invites us not to analyze it all too much. Just go where you feel an inkling.

Loorz suggests packing a bag such as you'd take on a day-hike. And then begin meandering into the place. Loorz writes "At some point, allow yourself to sense when it is time to cross a threshold, which could be stepping off the trail or walking under a branch on a tree or stepping over a stone." A threshold, Loorz teaches, "is an intentional way to tell yourself (and all the others) that you are breaking out of your regular way of seeing" and listening. You are moving "into a more present, more receptive mindset and a slower, more attentive way of moving." Before crossing the threshold, Loorz advises that we bow in reverence, or pray in the manner that is our custom, to mark the moment of change, and to "surrender, if even for this short time, your regular ways of rushing words through your brain and rushing your body through the path." She recommends that you "pray a blessing over the others," by which she means animals and plants in the place. Loorz says, "let them know you come in peace."

Then, you wander in "the sacred aliveness" in that place and let the place affect you just like a sacred text might affect you. Not to analyze the place, but to let it speak into you, and you into the place. Loorz recommends how to practice listening:

> When the chatter of your inner conversation blocks your ability to listen to the outside voices, tenderly sweep aside the words with a deep breath. Listen closely to the voices and songs near you, in the trees, in the plants, in the water perhaps. The voices of the birds. The movement of the other hidden ones. The gnats singing in your ears. Listen to the sounds close and far away—the human ones too. Just listen, That's all.

This open listening is among other practices Loorz recommends for wandering in a place to become aware of the place. In *Terra Divina*, wandering in a place is analogous to listening to a text in *Lection Divina.* Next, Loorz describes another level of meditative listening within the place that is analogous to *meditatio* in the traditional practice of *Lection Divina*. Then comes

What would it be like to go further into the outdoors, beyond the end of our electrical cords, with our digital devices turned off, to listen for both the creation and the creator?

26. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (Abbey of Gethsemani, 1966; originally 1960), 9-10.

27. Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Broadleaf, 2021). Loorz described *Terra Divina* on 223-228, and all the quotations and ideas of the rest of this section are from those pages.

some response that one can make, which includes gathering our feelings, memories, and thoughts. And finally comes "release" which is "to let it all go." With a prayer of gratitude and a bow, you cross back over the threshold, in reverse of what you had done upon entering.

Terra Divina is "a divine conversation with the sacred land," Loorz writes; it is analogous but different from interaction with scripture which is the center of *Lectio Divina*. Many of our pre-modern forebears in the faith regarded God's world, creation, to be a secondary book of revelation. *Terra Divina* is a method to allow ourselves access to the same. Loorz suggests that *Terra Divina* may be practiced by individuals or groups.

In addition to *Terra Divina*, Loorz gives detailed ideas for "wild church" gatherings in her book. You may google "Wild Church Network" to eavesdrop on those who are choosing to gather as church without buildings. They intend to be present with, and inclusive of, the more-than-human world. Of course, a wide range of ecclesiology and varieties of theology are in the Wild Church Network, and I'm not personally recommending any or all of the wild churches. But I'm encouraged that people are going outside with openness to listen.

Praying outdoors is to draw closer to echoes and resonances of the Word of God in, with, and under God's good creation. I believe that we people, who are mired in sin, need the Word and sacraments as the means of grace. The means of grace are specific gifts given by Christ that help us and strengthen us with the gospel. But the means of grace also show us scenes of grace. And God shows us scenes of grace in creation. Christ lives and moves throughout creation. While I would never presume to run out into the woods to capture God on my own, I do believe that if I am rooted and oriented in the means of grace—the Word, Holy Communion, and baptism—then I'm going to hear all sorts of interesting resonances of grace in God's creation. I'm going to encounter corroborations and challenging learning in God's created world. And creation is going to send me back to the altar, font, and pulpit with resonances of grace ringing in my ears, to hear again the central promise that Christ is with us.

B. Vespers and liturgy outdoors

The other practical idea from Merton's essay is that he prayed Vespers, which is liturgy. That means there was the presence of both the "speech" of the rain, and the intelligible Word of the gospel. In the gospel is a message that God wants us to hear. Liturgies are like mangers to cradle the gospel, the Word of God, in the created world. In the darkness of vespers, the dawning light of matins, or in the Holy Communion of gathering, word, sacraments, and sending, there is the Word that is "for you," the good news that is yours and ours specifically. The Word resonates in the wider context of God's creation and ongoing creativity.

In a book called *Holy Ground,* Gordon Lathrop showed the rich connections of Christian liturgy and ecology. He showed that liturgy posits cosmology and gives an orientation to being in the world. He said liturgy is like a map to orient us to where we are.

Liturgies are like mangers to cradle the gospel, the Word of God, in the created world. In the darkness of vespers, the dawning light of matins, or in the Holy Communion of gathering, word, sacraments, and sending, there is the Word that is "for you," the good news that is yours and ours specifically. The Word resonates in the wider context of God's creation and ongoing creativity.

Lathrop wrote, "the strong central symbols of Christian liturgy can stand in lively and helpful dialogue with the needs for a current cosmology;" and liturgical symbols have "surprising cosmological resonance." At the same time, in liturgy that is "biblically faithful, you will hear the cosmological surprise." That surprise is to hear the gospel, that the Lord is good and "the place on which you are standing is holy ground."[28]

Jill Crainshaw, another liturgical scholar, affirms that "the Gospel calls us to the work of listening, open-hearted, awe-sparked listening" to neighbors and world. "Talk is too easy," she says, "and can become little more than meaningless noise." But "worship can form in us," Crainshaw says, "a stance," which is, I think, like Lathrop's idea that liturgy offers orientation. Crainshaw says, "when we tune our ears to the world around us, we take a stance of attentive care for others. We resist endless empty chatter." And we "pay attention to how God is present in all of life and in each person's life."[29]

Vespers, a liturgy in the rain. Two kinds of speech. The resonance of "the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges," as Merton put it; and the talk of Vespers or liturgy that cradles the gospel in this world so we can hear it, as God wants us to hear it. Good news then echoes off "the watercourses everywhere in the hollows," in what Merton called "the most comforting speech in the world." This is the exciting thing for Christians coming to soundscapes with reverence. We can join and support the good work of respecting and restoring soundscapes, while at the same time celebrating that the very gospel that is our treasure, resounds in many surprising and delightful ways in God's ongoing creation.

28. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Fortress, 2003), 51, 15 and 22.

29. Jill Crainshaw, *When I in Awesome Wonder: Liturgy Distilled from Daily Life"* (Liturgical Press, 2017), 171.