

Holy Creatures Living Among Other Holy Creatures In A World That Is Holy

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I. What and Where Are We?

In his essay “Christianity and the Survival of Creation” Kentucky farmer, essayist, and poet Wendell Berry argues that the indictment by anti-Christian conservationists that Christianity is culpable in the destruction of the natural world “is in many respects just.” He writes that “Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations.”¹ In the very next breath, however, Berry insists that “however just it may be, it [the indictment of Christianity by anti-Christian conservationists] does not come from an adequate understanding of the Bible and the cultural traditions that descend from the Bible.” Critics too often dismiss the Bible, usually without ever reading it, Berry observes. He thus concludes: “Our predicament now, I believe, requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in light of the present fact of Creation.”²

Berry is quick to note that the “us” includes Christians as well as non-Christians. Indeed, Berry turns a scathing spotlight on the church when he observes: “I see some virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction and Christian behavior. I don’t mean disreputable Christian behavior, either. The discrepancies I see are between biblical instruction and allegedly

¹ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 94.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

respectable Christian behavior.”³ If there are such inconsistencies between what Scripture teaches and what we think is acceptable behavior, then what? What does it mean to understand the Bible in light of the present fact of Creation?

Never reticent to speak his mind, Berry offers his own short list of basic understandings. First, in the Bible we discover “that we humans do not own the world or any part of it.” We are always guests and stewards of God. Second, we find that “God made not only the parts of Creation that we humans understand and approve but all of it,” including stinging insects, poisonous weeds, and dangerous beasts. Third, we discover that “God found the world, as He made it, to be good, and that He made it for his pleasure, and that He continues to love it and find it worthy, despite its reduction and corruption by us.” Fourth, we find that “Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.”⁴ And so we discover, Berry concludes, if we read the Bible with an eye to the survival of both Christianity and creation, that “Our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God’s gifts into his face as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them.” In his reading of Scripture Berry strenuously insists “we have no entitlement from the Bible to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the waters beneath it. We have the right to use the gifts of nature but not to ruin or waste them.”⁵

In stark contrast to a reading of Scripture that underwrites the exploitation of the earth, Berry argues:

³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 96-98.

⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known than it is? Why is it apparently unknown to millions of professed students of the Bible? How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?⁶

Berry's succinct summation and convicting questions bear repeating. *We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.* What keeps this biblical understanding from being far better known than it is? Why is it apparently unknown to millions of professed students of the Bible? How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?

II. The Christian Doctrine of Creation

I have a hunch. Among the many factors at work here, allowing and even legitimating our hand folding while the work of God is destroyed, is a grave misunderstanding about what the doctrine of creation is and how it should work. "Any error about creation also leads to an error about God," cautions Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.3. Thomas' words contain much wisdom. We must get our doctrine of creation right if we are to get our doctrine of God right. But what does it mean to get our doctrine of creation right? What exactly constitutes an error about our understanding of creation?

In my own reflections I have followed the standard path on this matter. For example, I have spelled out the Christian doctrine of creation in terms of what I

⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

call "The Seven D's."⁷ Following my former teacher Bernard McGinn--who presents "four basic constituents of the idea of creation" found in Christian theology in what he calls "The Four D's:" *dependence, distinction, decision, and duration*⁸--I enlarge McGinn's list to include three more items: *design, defect, and delight*. For each theme I propose several affirmations and several denials concerning both creation and God.

First, *distinction*. A central belief of the Christian faith is that there is a fundamental ontological distinction.⁹ God is ontologically different from creation. Creation is other than God in being and God is transcendent to creation. Creation is, for example, finite while God is infinite. God is, in short, Uncreated Other. These affirmations are meant to repudiate a number of other perspectives. For example, disavowed is any pantheism or ontological monism in which God and creation are fundamentally identical in being. Creation is not divine or quasi-divine and God is not the same as or part of creation. *Creatio de deo* is not a legitimate Christian position. Creation is God's, but not God.¹⁰

Second, *dependence*. Equally central to the Christian tradition is the conviction that creation depends on God for its very existence. Creation is ontologically dependent on God for its being, while God, in contrast, is self-

⁷ Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Creation as the Home of God: The Doctrine of Creation in the Theology of Juergen Moltmann," *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1 (April 1997): 72-90.

⁸Bernard McGinn, "Do Christian Platonists Really Believe in Creation?" in *God and Creation*, eds. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1991), pp. 208-209. McGinn states that the list is not exhaustive, but rather, "a heuristic device for raising some of the right questions" concerning the adequacy of a given doctrine of creation.

⁹See, e.g., Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World* (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1984).

¹⁰Joseph Sittler, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," *Zygon* 5 (June 1970): 178.

existent.¹¹ God as creator and sustainer is immanent in, with, and under creation. God is, in short, Unconditioned Sustaining Source. These affirmations seek to rule out another set of alternative viewpoints. For example, an ontological dualism in which matter is seen as ultimate with or independent of God is rejected. *Creatio ex materia* is a theologically impermissible position.¹² Creation is not self-originating, self-perpetuating, or self-explanatory. So also deism is unacceptable. God is not aloof or on holiday. Any God-of-the-gaps theology must be rejected. While creation is not God, it is God's.¹³

Third, *decision*. Another basic conviction of the Christian faith is that God did not have to create--an implication of the classic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Creation is both ontologically and existentially contingent.¹⁴ That is, God did not have to create any world at all, and God was not obligated or forced to create this particular world. Creation need not be. It is, rather, a gracious act of a loving God. Thus God is not only personal--an agent able to freely intend and effect action--and omnipotent--an agent unconstrained by anything except the divine nature itself, but also loving. God is, in short, Gracious Person. These affirmations intend to place outside the pale certain historically prevalent perspectives. For example, both a Platonic cosmogony in which the creator is externally limited by recalcitrant matter and a neo-Platonic cosmogony in which a principle of plenitude necessitates that God create are incompatible with an orthodox view of divine sovereignty.¹⁵ Creation could not have been. It exists only because of God's gracious decision.

Fourth, *duration*. Following Boethius and the mainstream of the tradition, the fourth theme affirms that creation is temporal while God is eternal. Creation

¹¹Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991), p. 157.

¹²Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), ch. 3.

¹³Sittler, "Ecological Commitment," p. 178.

¹⁴Robert Russell, in *Cosmos as Creation*, ed. Ted Peters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), p. 195.

¹⁵Morris, *Our Idea of God*, pp. 148-149.

comes to be in or with time. God the creator, in contrast, stands outside of time altogether.¹⁶ God is, in short, Eternal Being. What is denied with these affirmations, to recall the debate at the University of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century, are the claims that creation is eternal (except perhaps for ontologically dependent but necessary and eternal things--ideas in the mind of God or abstract objects like numbers) and that God is temporal. Even those who argue that God is best viewed as everlasting rather than eternal still insist that, however God is in time, God is temporal in a quite different way than creatures.¹⁷ While able to act in time, God is also the master of time. God's relationship to time is unique--unlike that of any creature.

Fifth, *design*. Another central conviction of the Christian faith is that creation is both orderly and purposive. Creation is a cosmos--a universe of patterned regularity--and hence intelligible.¹⁸ Creation is, furthermore, an intentionally ordered cosmos. It exhibits the order it does for a reason, namely, because God the creator made it so. As Psalm 104 declares, creation is fashioned in wisdom to manifest the glory of a creating and sustaining God. God is, in short, Wise Maker. These affirmations constitute rejections of any position that views the world as ultimately chaotic or which understands the order of the world as entirely arbitrary or random. Also rejected is any position in which God is construed as non-personal or unintelligent or capricious. God is not like Aristotle's unmoved mover--thought endlessly thinking its own thoughts. Creation is the ordered system it is because God made it that way.

¹⁶See, e.g., Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity" in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas Morris (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).

¹⁷Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and The Good*, eds. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

¹⁸Gilkey, *Maker*, ch. 5.

Sixth, *defect*. One of the distinguishing features of Christian theology is the belief that creation is essentially good.¹⁹ So, for example, finitude is good. Evil is a perversion of God's intentions for creation--an adventitious quality rather than an essential property. The fall, in other words, is contingent, not necessary. God is, correspondingly, omnibeneficent. In short, God is Perfect Goodness. These affirmations are intended to repudiate a variety of commonly held beliefs, e.g., the belief that finitude is evil and hence something to be escaped. Evil is not intrinsic or essential to creation--contra Manicheanism or certain forms of Gnosticism. Evil is all too real, but it is an alien intruder which has no legitimate place in God's good creation. God does not have a split personality--part good, part evil. God is not morally imperfect. Rather, God is the summit of moral goodness.

Seventh and last, *delight*. An often overlooked aspect of the Christian doctrine of creation is the conviction that creation, in all of its multitudinous variety, is a place of beauty and enjoyment and is of value simply because God made it. In the effusiveness of divine grace, God has created and continues to create and sustain a profusion of beings whose existence provokes wonder and whose value extends beyond their usefulness to humans. Instrumental value to humans is only one of several values non-human creatures have.²⁰ So God is not only a faithful supplier of things needful, but also a generous giver of that which evokes joy.²¹ God is, in short, Generous Provider. Repudiated by these claims are a number of currently influential beliefs, perhaps most prevalent an anthropocentric utilitarianism which finds creation valuable only insofar as it serves human needs and wants. Also problematic is any view of God as miserly or parsimonious. In

¹⁹Ibid., ch. 7.

²⁰Holmes Rolston, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1988), ch. 1.

²¹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), ch. 7.

contrast, creation is valuable irrespective of its utility for humans, and God is magnanimous in creating a world both bountiful and beautiful.

III. A Performative Understanding of the Doctrine of Creation

Such is one fairly standard approach to understanding the Christian doctrine of creation. But now back to my questions and my hunch. What does it mean to get our doctrine of creation right? What exactly constitutes an error about our understanding of creation? My hunch is simply this: we have assumed understanding the doctrine of creation means giving intellectual assent to various propositions or claims, such as those above. Getting the doctrine of creation right means adequately understanding The Seven D's or some such formulation. But my attempt at stating the doctrine, like most such articulations, is much too abstract. While perhaps helpful in certain ways, it is bloodless and lifeless—a living, breathing, Holy Spirit-inspired world away from warblers and waxwings and woodpeckers. Because we assume that assent to such lifeless formulations constitutes understanding of the doctrine, we have, to use Berry's words, solemnly folded our hands while much of God's work has been and is being destroyed. Our doctrinal formulation, or more exactly our construal of what a proper understanding of this doctrine means, has contributed to the pillage and plunder of God's good earth and our planetary home.

But what if an adequate understanding the doctrine means performing the actions implicit in the claims? What if it means doing what the propositions behaviorally entail? What if rightly or properly understanding the doctrine of creation means knowing in our bones, and thus living in our everyday behavior, that we are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy?

Nicholas Lash, in his insightful essay “Performing the Scriptures,” argues that different kinds of texts call for different kinds of readings.²² In his words, “for different kinds of texts, different kinds of activity count as the fundamental form of their interpretation.”²³ Lash uses two analogies to help us understand what he means. For a Beethoven string quartet, the academic skills of the text critics who make the score available and the historical research of musicologists who contribute to the on-going history of Beethoven interpretation are important, but to properly interpret a Beethoven string quartet four skilled musicians must actually perform the score. As Lash puts it: “The fundamental form of the interpretation of Beethoven consists in the performance of his texts.”²⁴ So also with Shakespeare’s plays. As Lash states, *King Lear* is “another example of a text the fundamental form of the interpretation of which consists in its performance.” As with the musical analogy, with a Shakespeare play “the expertise required by actors and producer in order to perform well is of a different order from that required of the indispensable but subordinate academic interpreters: the textual critics, historians of Elizabethan drama, literary critics and philosophers.”²⁵ Lash’s point with these analogies is simply this: “There are at least some texts that only begin to deliver their meaning in so far as they are ‘brought into play’ through interpretive performance.”²⁶ *Meaning is contingent on doing.*

Lash proceeds to argue that “although the texts of the New Testament may be read, and read with profit, by anyone interested in Western culture and concerned for the human predicament, the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity, and organization of the believing

²² Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), ch. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

community.” This Christian practice, furthermore, “consists in the performance of texts which are construed as ‘rendering,’ bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, ‘rendered’ the truth of God in human history.”²⁷ In other words, insofar as we Christians live out the Story we claim we believe and embrace, we re-present the life and teachings of Christ in the life of the Church. This approach, Lash suggests, has the merit of reminding us “that the poles of Christian interpretation are not, in the last analysis, written texts...but patterns of human action: what was said, done, and suffered, then, by Jesus and his disciples, and what is said, done, and suffered, now, by those who seek to share his obedience and his hope.”²⁸ Could not the same be said for the doctrine of creation, namely, that its “truth” ultimately is a set of practices, a way of being in the world that depicts and reproduces the way of Christ? If so, then “getting the doctrine of creation right” means *enacting particular patterns of human action*.

In his book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* Richard Hayes makes a very similar argument. The last of his ten “proposed guidelines for New Testament ethics” is that “right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the Word is embodied.”²⁹ As Hayes continues: “The hermeneutical enterprise is not completed by the work of analysis and commentary; to interpret a text rightly is to put it to work, to perform it in a way that is self-involving so that our interpretations become acts of ‘commitment at risk.’” By way of support Hayes explicitly seconds Lash’s claim that “the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity, and organization of the believing community.”³⁰ Hence in his summary “diagnostic checklist” Hayes gives emphasis to what he calls “the fruits

²⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Richard Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 310.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 305.

test.” In other words, one crucial question to ask of any interpretation is “How is this vision embodied in a living community? Does the community manifest the fruit of the Spirit?”³¹ Once again, could not the same be asked of the doctrine of creation? Paraphrasing Hayes’ key question: What sort of communities have resulted or might result from putting their understanding of the doctrine of creation into practice?³²

Let me be honest and to the point. I agree with Berry’s observation that many Christian organizations are indifferent to the despoliation of the earth. All too often we are so busy debating the origins of the universe (“creationism versus evolutionism”) to notice either the degradation of our watershed or the beauty of the night sky. We sing the doxology (“Praise God all creatures here below”) while ignorant of or indifferent to the fact that we are causing the largest mass extinction since the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago. Church parking lots on Sunday morning, with their gas guzzling SUV’s, look no different than corporate parking lots on Monday morning. Christian college and university campuses appear to be no different than their secular counterparts.

And I share Berry’s frustration that however just the indictment of Christianity by anti-Christian conservationists may be, it does not come from an adequate understanding of the Bible. The Bible begins and ends with rivers and trees. The Bible speaks of Christ as the One for whom all things were created, the One in whom all things hang together, and the One through whom all things will be reconciled. The Bible portrays God’s glorious good future as earthly and earthy. *Alas, we Christians--and perhaps especially we Christian theologians, called to be teachers of the Church--have not done near enough to help people understand the full meaning of the doctrine of creation as enacted, performed, lived. A*

³¹ Ibid., p. 213.

³² Ibid., p. 212.

performative understanding of the doctrine of creation would help us to realize that knowing the doctrine means living it. As Joseph Sittler presciently put it, in a 1973 essay entitled “Evangelism and Care of the Earth”:

If *in piety* the Church says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24:1), and *in fact* is no different in thought and action from the general community, who will be drawn to her word and worship to “come and see” that her work or salvation has any meaning? Witness in saying is irony and bitterness if there be no witness in doing?³³

IV. Two Times, Two Places, One Story

So in addition to the traditional statement of the doctrine of creation, in order to more fully grasp the performative nature of the doctrine, perhaps we need a different rhetorical strategy—one less abstract, bloodless, lifeless. Here’s but one example.

Long ago the earth was filled with wickedness and violence. The creatures made in God’s image and entrusted with the care and cultivation of the earth had only evil in their hearts. Then as now things were off-kilter, bent and warped and broken. Like a disease, violence had infected the earth. Like a body out of joint, the earth was dismembered.

And it grieved God’s heart that he had brought humans into existence, for it was their wickedness and violence that had wrecked havoc on the earth.

Therefore, God resolved to wash away this wickedness--to destroy all flesh on the earth.

Water and trees. Blue and green as far as the eye can see. A land of forest, lake, and stream. A labyrinth of water on this the water planet. Such is the Quetico-Superior wilderness of northeastern Minnesota and western Ontario. A canoe paddler’s paradise, this two-million-acre expanse of enchanted lakes, meandering rivers, and dense forest contains some of the oldest exposed rock on earth. With outcrops dated to three billion years ago, this ancient Precambrian bedrock, called the Canadian Shield, stretches in a vast arc from the Atlantic to the Arctic Sea across the upper part of North America. Walking on rock so old prompts you to marvel at the temporal scale of the natural world.

³³ Joseph Sittler, “Evangelism and Care of the Earth,” in *Evocations of Grace: Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, eds. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 206.

But Noah found favor in God's sight, and so God decided to spare Noah and his family and two of "every living thing of all flesh," male and female. Mysteriously God instructed Noah to build a boat—a rather large boat. This craft was to hold Noah, his wife, his sons and their wives, and two of every living thing, male and female—birds and animals and creeping things--each according to their kind. And the ark was to carry all the necessary provisions--food and drink not just for the people but also for all the other creatures--because God had made a covenant with Noah and cared for the nonhuman creatures whom Noah was instructed to nudge and cajole aboard his vessel.

Nearby your campsite is a large pond. On one end you see a dam, built by a colony of beavers. A marvel of engineering prowess, with sticks and logs and mud every which way, the dam is able to bear your weight and then some as well as hold back the water. Not far from the dam you notice a large dome-shaped lodge. Twelve feet across and six feet high above the water, with two underwater entrances and walls four feet thick to keep the inner chamber free from predators such as the lynx and bobcat as well as above freezing even in the coldest winter, the lodge is a snug and safe haven. As you quietly approach the lodge, you spot a beaver—black and brown fur glistening, long whiskers on dark nose, wide and flat tail—just before it dives underwater. Weighing in at up to sixty pounds, the beaver is the second largest rodent in the world, after the South American capybara, and ranks second only to humans in its ability to deliberately alter its environment. With large front teeth that are, due to timber cutting, constantly resharpened, the beaver is able to down a two- to three-inch-diameter aspen in thirty seconds. Such prodigious tree-cutting ability is a necessity when not only your shelter but your food is at stake, for the beaver is entirely vegetarian, preferring the bark of aspen and birch, as well as twigs and leaves. Though able to move on land, the beaver vastly prefers the water, and so its industrious dam-building serves to make available trees and vegetation otherwise unaccessible. By flooding large areas, the average colony can more easily forage a large expanse for food.

So Noah obediently gathered his menagerie of creatures—wild and domestic, flying and creeping--in numbers sufficient to preserve their fruitfulness. And with Noah they went into the ark "two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life."

Wild animals—hippos and hyenas and hedgehogs.

Domestic animals—dogs and goats and cows.

Birds—quetzels and cockatoos and crows.

Creeping things—scorpions and stink bugs and snakes.

While wading in the pond your eye catches the zigzag pattern of water striders skittering over the surface of the water. Buzzing just above the water is a dragonfly—its long body powered by two pairs of veined wings. Exiting the pond you shake your feet in the water to rinse off the mud--except a piece of mud does not rinse off your left big toe. You reach down and, behold, a leech. Four inches long and a half inch wide, with a gray-brown body, this worm-like bloodsucker

evokes a near universal disdain. But leeches are an important part of the food web—providing nourishment for fish such as northern pike and walleye and also breaking down dead organic matter, thereby making crucial nutrients available to plants and all manner of aquatic organisms. Even the lowly leech has its role—its niche—in the functioning of the pond ecosystem.

And then the waters came, and came, and came. For a very long time. And everything on the earth in which there was the breath of life died. The waters of chaos once again threatened to engulf the order of creation. Like a pinprick of light in a sea of darkness, only Noah and those with him in the ark were left.

As dusk falls, back at your campsite on a large island-studded lake, you hear the rhythmic “peep” of the spring peepers as well as the guitar-pluck “guunng” of the green frog along the water’s edge. Each male sings out to demarcate and defend his territory. You also observe the erratic flight of numerous little brown bats, flying low as they scoop in up to three hundred mosquitoes and other insects in a single hour. Without the maligned mosquito, these bats would be malnourished. Though not blind—contrary to what many believe—at night the bat must rely on his acute hearing to locate his prey. Using an amazing process called echolocation, bats send out ten to twenty high-pitched calls every second. Like underwater sonar, these sounds bounce off objects and return to the bat as echoes. Able to distinguish a flying beetle from a moth, the bat’s sense of hearing is incredibly acute and discriminating, as it must be if it is to survive.

But God remembered.
 God remembered Noah.
 God remembered all the wild animals in the ark.
 God remembered all the domestic animals in the ark.
 But God remembered.

With the waters swelling and all else lost save the ark, with the powers of chaos encircling and threatening to overwhelm, with the deep a yawning abyss ready to swallow the lonely bark, God remembered the inhabitants of his floating species preserve. And more. God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. Once again, just as in primeval creation, in this act of re-creation God’s Spirit brooded and blew over the chaotic waters, and the waters subsided. Chaos was controlled. Shalom—peace, harmony, balance—was restored.

Your reverie in observing bats is broken by a quavering sound—one of the haunting calls of that prototypical north woods bird, the common loon. This vibrato-like laugh you hear is the tremelo. Another loon more distant down the lake joins in, and you are serenaded with a tremelo duet. Just then you hear another of the loon’s four distinctive calls—the wail. This plaintive three-note call—long and mournful like the cry of the wolf—is a way of saying, “Where are you?” or, “Here I am.” On this night you hear a third distinctive loon cry—the yodel of the male. A

complex chain of three to four three-part squeals, this call is used to attract a mate and defend territory. You now know where the expression “crazy as a loon” comes from. Only the quiet “hoot” eludes your listening ears on this night.

The ark dwellers were thus saved from the waters--waters that, as it turned out, cleansed the earth and provided Noah and his kin with new life. And all the living things in the crazy-making ark were released. Indeed, Noah brought out his restless ark dwellers “so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” God’s purpose is made clear: Noah and his family and all the nonhuman families exited the ark to repopulate and replenish the now renewed earth. A new beginning. A clean slate. A fresh start.

Of all the creatures of the north woods, by common consent the most alluring is not the moose, the black bear, or the gray wolf but rather the common loon. Big birds with a wingspan of about five feet, weighing up to fifteen pounds, and marked by a jet black head, red eyes, white plumage, and a long sharp bill, the loon is easy to recognize. Loons are fishing machines, built for diving. Their bodies are streamlined, with legs far to the rear for effective padding, and their red eyes allow them to see more clearly underwater. Their bones are not hollow, like other birds, but solid, thus giving them a low-in-the-water look and the ability to dive to great depths. Loons have been taken in fishing nets 240 feet deep. Able to stay underwater for up to fifteen minutes, loons swim fast enough to catch game fish such as trout and perch, spearing their prey with their beak and then, after surfacing, swallowing it whole. Being built for diving makes flying more difficult, but loons are, in fact, powerful fliers. Requiring as much as one hundred yards before they can get airborne, once in wing the loon cruises at 75 mph and has been clocked as fast as 100 mph. An amazingly well-adapted creature in this land of water, the loon is an unforgettable inhabitant native to this place.

After Noah built an altar and made a sacrifice, God resolved never again to curse the ground because of humankind and never again to destroy the earth by water. And God once again blessed the humans, repeating the words given before violence and wickedness entered the world: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Only this time, significantly, God does not include the command to subdue and have dominion over the earth and its creatures. It were as if God thought better of giving that command this time, given the mess humans had made of the earth. Taking the command to rule into their own hands, mistaking dominion for domination, the human earth-creature had perverted its royal responsibility and polluted the earth. This time, however, God explicitly grants permission to eat meat, so long as the blood, or life force, is not consumed. Though humans are now carnivores, respect for life is still the rule. But as one might expect, fear and dread come upon their prey.

On your leisurely walk from pond back to lakeshore campsite, you travel through a forest of balsam fir and white spruce, with some northern white cedar near the water's edge. No birches or aspens stand among these conifers, for the forest through which you walk is a fine example of a climax boreal forest. Sometimes nicknamed "the spruce-moose forest," the boreal forest circumnavigates the earth, for it is found not only in the northern climes of North America but also in Finland, the Ukraine, and northern China. As you walk you see many balsam fir, with their famously fragrant needles, as well as pyramidal, Christmas-tree-like spruce here and there. Near the shore is the ubiquitous white cedar, with its scaly needles and peely bark. You wonder why all the cedar branches are the same height and then remember that deer browse on the cedar in the winter. The lowest level of these branches represents the highest reach of the hungry deer.

And then God again establishes a covenant. Six times in quick succession we hear of a divine covenant:

- 1) "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark."
- 2) "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you."
- 3) "It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."
- 4) "I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh."
- 5) "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between me and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."
- 6) "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

From the crescendo of God's remembering we come to the majesty of God's covenanting.

Darkness settles in, like a gentle friend blanketing the land. With a new moon the stars blaze back at you brighter than you have ever seen them. Canis Major and Canis Minor, Draco, Cassiopeia, Cephas, Aquila, Lyra, Signus—these constellations and many more in all their stellar glory. And then, out of the corner of one eye, you see a weird dancing light just over the horizon. After a few seconds you realize you are witnessing the famed aurora borealis, or northern lights. Sigurd Olson describes the indescribable as well as anyone:

The lights of the aurora moved and shifted over the horizon. Sometimes there were shafts of yellow tinged with green, then masses of evanescence that moved from east to west and back again. Great streamers of bluish white zigzagged like a tremendous trembling curtain from one end of the sky to the other. Streaks of yellow and orange and red shimmered along the flowing borders. Never for a moment were they still, fading until

they were almost completely gone, only to dance forth again in renewed splendor with infinite combinations and startling patterns of design.³⁴ Caused by great solar flares that traverse the ninety-three million miles from our star to our home planet and enter the earth's magnetic field, the northern lights are perhaps the most beautiful reminder that, in the words of a poem, "though things near and distant are, they are connected from afar."

We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.
May we teach and preach and live the doctrine of creation, that more may know its power and its truth.

³⁴ Sigurd Olson, *Sigurd Olson's Wilderness Days* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972), p. 192.