

## I. Intro.: (walking around) Confession to make

### A. As one of your pastors, I'm not always loyal to worship only with you here in this Waterford sanctuary ...

1. A few days ago I went and worshiped w/ another congregation in a different sanctuary
2. It's hard to compare it with our worship at Waterford, so I need to tell you about it

### B. It was an unusual kind of worship experience for me ...

1. Because most of the worshipers seemed to be doing their own thing, praising God in their individual ways ... But a few couples, families and friends grouped themselves together for worship
2. Right when I arrived, I startled a group of worshipers, possibly in prayer, and caused them to relocate elsewhere ... I felt bad about it, but thankfully they didn't leave the sanctuary because of me.
3. Speaking of the sanctuary, it was big! ... **very** big, so the worshipers had plenty of elbow room
  - a) In fact felt quite free to get up and move around when they wanted to
  - b) Wouldn't you like to do that in church?
4. and the singers ... they were remarkable!
  - a) They didn't all sing synchronized with each other and they were rather independent about when they started and stopped singing
  - b) Yet it sounded lovely, and they harmonized very well, at least the singers that I could hear in this cavernous space
5. At this worship, there was no one preacher monopolizing the airwaves for 20 minutes
  - a) Even so, there was never a silent time when someone wasn't singing
  - b) Sometimes one would start singing and someone else on the far side would echo the same chorus

### C. Here's the most remarkable thing I realized: this congregation never stops worshiping God!

1. They're doing that all the time!
2. I've worshiped with them before, but I always feel like I'm joining their service already in progress.

3. Best part for me was when I left these dear worshipers, I was only about a minute's walk away from a much more familiar worship sanctuary: this one right here! (*back to pulpit*)

#### **D. Yes, the sanctuary where I worshiped was out on our church's wetland trails**

1. Some of the same trails you just saw onscreen during offering time ... the one bird picture you saw may have been one of my fellow worshipers
2. You see, I'm a casual birdwatcher, so there was one essential piece of equipment that I needed when I showed up for worship that day: *pull out hidden binoculars, and put around neck*
3. So who were my fellow worshipers?
  - a) Well, there were some who worship w/ me at home nearly every day:
    - Robins, cardinals, downy woodpeckers
    - Black-capped chickadees, starlings, and many kinds of sparrows
  - b) There were others who I see worshipping regularly, but not every week:
    - Northern flickers, redbellied woodpeckers, and redwing blackbirds
    - Mallards, Canada geese, and great blue herons
  - c) Then there were some very special worshipers who I rarely see, so being in their company was a treat for me:
    - A tufted titmouse
    - An Eastern towhee
    - And a pair of sandhill cranes, with their loud raspy songs
4. As you can tell, it was a very diverse congregation, and that doesn't begin to include all the trees, flowers, grasses, insects, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles

## **II. Recap prior parts of worship series in January and February**

**A.** First, I reminded us of the dangers of a consumerist mindset, repeating the simple theme, "**Worship is ultimately not about us, it's about God.**"

**B.** In seeing God in the everyday of life, **Velma invited us to do three things:**

1. Show up and pay attention
2. Stop the flow of words to just listen and reflect
3. Practice the presence of God in daily living

**C.** Cindy reminded us that, much like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, **Jesus Christ continually transforms us into a new creation for God.**

**D.** I later challenged us to **unmask idolatry in our midst, lest we begin to resemble whatever we revere**, whether that be sports, comfort, military power, or even our very families

**E.** Finally, Lyle helped us realize that **God created us individuals to be in community, and that worshipping God happens best when children of all ages come together.**

**III.** As I described my other worship experience this morning, **my point is that I didn't just "go on a nature walk"**

**A.** I didn't just go bird-watching to see how many feathered creatures I could name

1. I was **a co-worshiper with God's creation** ... I joined God's amazingly diverse congregation of creatures in doing what we were all created by God to do: worship our creator

2. It's just that I did it **on those creatures' turf**, in a sanctuary not made with hammers and saws and manufactured building materials

**B.** Here's one of the biblical realities that appears in several Bible passages but especially in Ps. 148:

1. that *all creation, including humans, was made to worship God the creator, and in some sense, cannot help but do so, by its very nature*

a) I believe Martin Luther the reformer once wrote,

*"God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but on trees, flowers, clouds and stars."*

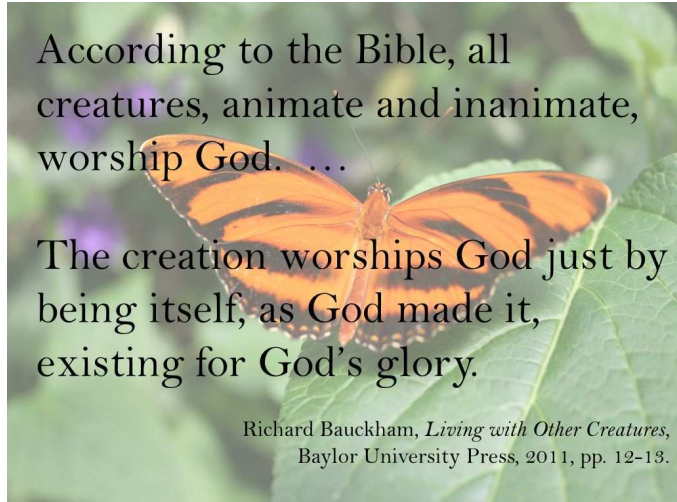
b) We are not, in and of ourselves, the gospel ... but the existence of this beautiful world and our place in it are testimony to God's power and God's loving creative intentions.



c) British theologian Richard Bauckham helped me understand this in his recent book, *Living with Other Creatures* (Baylor University Press, 2011, pp. 12-13)

*According to the Bible, all creatures, animate and inanimate, worship God. ... The creation worships God just by being itself, as God made it, existing for God's glory.*

2. Having said that, I realize that the co-worshiping interplay between humans and the rest of God's creation is not nearly so idyllic and simple as it might appear just by walking along our church trails



- a) We live in a fallen and sinful reality where much of what goes on in our world is acting against God's good intentions in creation.
- b) It's a paradox how we can rebel against the God who created us while we also reflect God's glory simply by the marvel of our existence.

God's fingerprints are in and all around us, and we depend on God's good resources every second that we live,

and yet, through the sinful choices that we make and the short-sighted destructive systems we have built up, we despoil God's resources and harm our fellow humans and other creatures

#### **IV. So why have a Sunday like today as part of a larger series on worship? (3 reasons)**

##### **A. First, it links worship to stewardship action**

- 1. Highlighting creation within a series on worship helps us accept our Christian responsibility to care for creation, rather than abusing and destroying it
- 2. To that end, we are not total newcomers at WMC

- a) We have tried to put some actions behind our words in several ways:

The very existence of these wetlands and trails is a priceless treasure unrecognized by many in this church and the broader community

Over a year ago we formed a new Creation Care Ministry Team to guide our thinking and our actions as stewards of God's creation

At times we have taken symbolic actions like a fellowship meal where we try to bring food from within 100 miles of here.

Congregational leaders recently gave our support to a Creation Care resolution that will be presented to Mennonite Church USA delegates at the denominational convention in Phoenix this summer

**B. Yet in our efforts to reduce the pillaging of the earth, we run the risk of the pendulum swinging too far the other way.**

1. Earlier we repeated that worship is about God, not about us ...

a) A series like this, 2<sup>nd</sup> of all, reminds us that, as much as we cherish the natural world God has given us, *we dare not let it become our idol*

b) The monotheism of the Christian faith makes crystal clear the distinction between the Creator and the creation

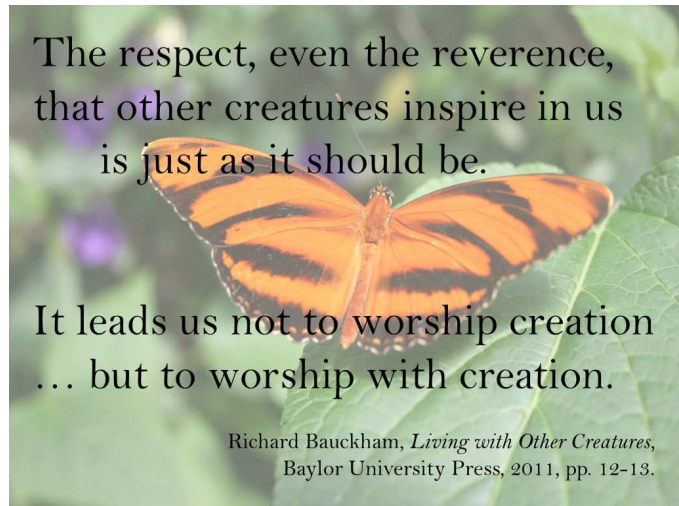
2. Again, Bauckham points this out nicely,

*The respect, even the reverence, that other creatures inspire in us is just as it should be. It leads us not to worship creation ... but to worship with creation.*

**C. Third, it guards against the arrogance that we humans are the only ones who worship God**

1. My opening illustration was meant to gently ask, *"Do we really believe that the people who gather in churches, synagogues, and mosques are the only worshipers God has?"*

2. If we have a sharing time today in our services, I invite you to briefly share a specific time when God met you and other worshipers in an outdoor sanctuary, but when there were few if any other humans in that congregation that day.



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that other creatures inspire in us  
is just as it should be.

It leads us not to worship creation  
... but to worship with creation.

Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*,  
Baylor University Press, 2011, pp. 12-13.

**V. Psalm 148 makes strong case for creation being co-worshipers with us, but what about the other text today from Acts 17?**

**A. This story picks up in the middle of Apostle Paul's second missionary journey through parts of what is today Turkey and Greece**

1. In chapter 17 Paul finds himself in Athens, waiting for his missionary friends Silas and Timothy to catch up with him.

a) Like he had done earlier, Paul first headed to the synagogues to argue his case for Jesus with the Jews

b) Along the way he also came across some interested Gentile folks, and they invited him to present his message at the Areopagus, which was the main Roman court in the city of Athens

Now Athens was a religious free-for-all with many ideas and beliefs openly being debated

So Paul was given the chance to present this new message of good news in Jesus to non-Jewish people ...

2. In a highly religious city that was already full of idols and people searching for the divine, how would he make his case?

a) To make a long story short, he tried to think and talk more like a Greek person than like a Jew

E.g., he took two quotations from ancient Greek poets as entry points for his listeners, but he reinterpreted those quotes toward Christianity ...

b) Paul basically engaged the Athenian leaders on their own terms

### **B. Now let's step back a bit from the details of this story**

1. What's the value of this story for us today in a series about worship itself? Why did I choose this passage to preach from, along with Psalm 148?

2. I think it helps to get the "balcony view" of what Paul was doing

a) Here's the long and the short of it: *Paul was doing cross-cultural mission work*

He was trying to sensitively reach across cultural barriers for the sake of the good news of Jesus ... referring to Greek authors and Greek ways of thinking to connect to Greek people

b) He knew that Greek audiences did not bring the same set of issues that Jewish audiences did, yet he was seeking to make known to them about God what was previously unknown

### **C. A Scripture passage like this raises intriguing and challenging questions of us Christians in the USA nearly 2,000 years later ...**

1. Could today's environmental movement be one possible parallel to the inquisitive Athenians of the Areopagus?

a) Could the questions and crises presented by the secular environmental movement be a fruitful engagement point for Christians?

b) The world abounds today with cynical people who have dismissed the church as either hypocritical or irrelevant for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

2. I believe that engaging some of these cynics with positive words and actions toward caring for our earth might be a legitimate way to follow in the cross-cultural footsteps of the Apostle Paul in Athens!

a) In fact, churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have come a long way toward a responsible stance as stewards of God's creation, but there is still a long way to go.

b) I hope that after the Phoenix convention the way will be clear for groups like Mennonite Creation Care Network to provide Mennonite congregations w/ resources for study and response in creation care.

3. One potential example of an "Areopagus parallel" in our midst took place right here on Feb. 27 as part of our Soul Food Wednesday offerings

a) We had two leaders from Transition Goshen give an introduction to the Transition movement,

b) Transition is a loosely-organized international movement that supports community-led responses to climate change by promoting resilient local communities in areas like food, transportation, energy usage, the arts, etc.

c) One of the conversation leaders was from a local Mennonite church, while the other leader had recently moved to Goshen from a larger, more secularized location, and he was impressed by the positive influence of churches that is felt on the way of life in the Goshen community

## **VI. Conclusion**

### **A. Today we recognize that God's creation is integrally part of the worship that we give to God**

1. Along with all God's creatures around us, we were made to give praise and glory back to God

2. and whether we're aware of it or not, creation is worshiping God all the time

3. So hopefully when we allow God's marvelous creation to be part of our worship, witnessing to God's glory, that in turn moves us to more actively be good caretakers of creation

### **B. And just like Paul expressed his Christian faith by engaging the culture of his day on its own terms**

1. So I invite us to consider if one of the more effective witnesses we can give to a Christian faith that is relevant in today's world is to harness that faith where appropriate alongside others in causes that care for creation, even when other peoples' motivations are not faith-based

2. In so doing, we just might serve as an agent for the creating and redeeming work of God to become known and acceptable to someone who previously did not know it or believe it