

September 25, 2022
Season of Creation, Week 2, Year C (Storm Sunday)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Job 28:20-27
Psalm 29
1 Corinthians 1:20-31
Luke 8:22-25

Planet Earth will enter a new era of its history, cheerfully called by some the Anthropocene, a time for and all about our one species alone. I prefer to call it the Eremocene, the Age of loneliness.¹

Those are the words of E. O Wilson, the author, Harvard biologist, and foremost authority on ants, who died last year. They open the summer 2022 issue of *Orion Magazine*. *Orion Magazine* claims to be about “Nature and Culture”; I also find it to be about Spirit. Each issue is thematic; the editors described the theme of the summer 2022 issue this way: “This issue aims to answer one question: when did the Anthropocene—the age of time defined by man’s imprint on planet Earth—begin?”²

I love *Orion Magazine*, but that issue was tough reading. It’s a collection of short essays, each less than a page long, and each bearing a title that begins with the words, “The age of . . .” The very first essay foreshadowed just how the rest of the issue would go. Its title is “The Age of Plutonium.” The subtitle is “We’ve made our mark on geologic time.”³ This beautiful essay is about radioactive fallout from nuclear testing, with a particular illustration drawn from Yucca Flat, Nevada. It includes these words: “Worldwide, plutonium dust forms a twelve-year line in the sediment that simply did not exist before it did. It marks a dramatic transition in the ground on which we walk, an experiment whose fallout continues to this day.”⁴ The essays in this issue of *Orion* were as lyrical as they always are in that publication, but I could read only one at a time. Every one of them felt like a Hulk-sized hand pressed into my chest. The origin of the Anthropocene feels like the beginning of the end.

Today is the third Sunday of the Season of Creation, which this year is Storm Sunday. It seems fitting to be talking about storms today as the remnants of Hurricane Ian peter out over the mid-Atlantic and the scale of destruction in Florida becomes apparent. I grew up in south Louisiana, and I just don’t remember hurricane seasons then being nearly as frightful as they are now. Because I know that human memory is a fickle thing, I Googled the question “Are hurricanes getting stronger?” The first returned link took me to a 2019 article from the website Yale Climate Connections. It opens with this: “Major hurricanes are by far the world’s costliest natural weather disasters, in some cases causing well over \$100 billion in damage. There’s now evidence that the unnatural effects of human-caused global warming are already making hurricanes stronger and more destructive. The latest research shows the trend is likely to continue as long as the climate continues to warm.”⁵

If we think in metaphors, we might note that hurricanes aren't the only storms whipped up by global warming. There are, for example, storms of heat and storms of drought and storms of wildfire, storms of rising ocean levels, storms of species displacement. Of course, global warming isn't the only side-effect of human activity, the only source of un-natural natural disaster. To name just a couple, there is the impact of noise on the inhabitants of the ocean and light on the inhabitants of the air. We're only just starting to understand all that. Regarding so much of it all, we don't even know what we don't know. What we do know is that we're starting to feel it.

Some time ago, *The Christian Century* magazine published an article with this title: "Our problem isn't just loneliness—it's species loneliness."⁶ That concept of species loneliness resonated so deeply for me that the title of that article has echoed in my mind ever since. That's unusual for me; that doesn't really happen; clearly it was going to have to show up in a sermon someday. Last week I decided that that day would be today, and so I pulled out that article. I expected to see that it was published maybe a year or so ago. To my surprise, it was actually published in January 2020—in other words, just before the COVID-19 pandemic started. I think the resonance of that article might have been amplified by the events that followed. You remember that time of fear, isolation, and loneliness. It was, perhaps, loneliness upon loneliness.

As to the term *species loneliness*, a Google search for its origin turned up one article that said it was introduced in 1993.⁷ I don't remember seeing it before that *Christian Century* article, but I stumbled on it again when I finally got around to reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's wonderful book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Last week I read a long story from that book. Today I'll just offer just two sentences. As Kimmerer describes it, species loneliness is "a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors."⁸

We're not just isolated from our neighbors, our neighbors are dying: the sixth extinction is said to be underway. For a Christian perspective on this, we might turn to Thomas Berry, the noted scholar of world religion, cultural historian, and Roman Catholic priest. He said this: "We should be clear about what happens when we destroy the living forms of this planet. The first consequence is that we destroy modes of divine presence."⁹ Life forms as modes of divine presence. I wonder how human thought and behavior might shift if we thought of animals and plants and fungi as modes of divine presence.

Last week was fauna Sunday, and so I talked about the relationship of humans with other animals. This sermon basically expands on that one to include other forms of life. It was over the summer that I began bookmarking articles I thought I might use during the Season of Creation this year. Because I'm interested in this subject, I ended up with way more than I could use. I do want to mention a couple that are pertinent to today's topic. First is an article from July: "How religious worship is boosting conservation in India: Religious practices have preserved an estimated 100,000-150,000 sacred groves across India, ensuring they remain biodiverse habitats home to an array of endangered species."¹⁰ Second is an article from August and the Lambeth Conference of bishops from across the Anglican Communion: "At Lambeth Palace, bishops and spouses celebrate launch of Anglican Communion forest initiative."¹¹

Christianity has long been used to justify environmental exploitation. Clearly, it doesn't have to be that way. Maybe we can take some hope from some of the things that are starting to happen.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, the disciples are in a boat on a lake when a storm comes up. In a panic of fear for their lives, they wake Jesus. They aren't portrayed as asking him to do anything; it seems that they're just letting him know that they're all going to die while he sleeps away. Jesus knows better, but he goes ahead and stills that storm. He then asks, "Where is your faith?" Notice this: it's only then that Luke describes those disciples as afraid and amazed. They are afraid and amazed not because of the power of the storm, but because of the power of Jesus to still the storm. Christians like us are often reticent to claim that Jesus. But in these stormy times, when we are so at risk of falling subject to a lethargy born of despondency, and maybe even the eventual death that comes with it, maybe that Jesus is exactly who we need. He will save us, not by stilling any particular storm, but simply by asking this: "Where is your faith?"

Where is *your* faith? It can't just reside here within this building. It has to go out there, where it can engage in a variety of relationships with others, and not just with others who are human. Only you can decide what that looks like for you.

For most of my life, I have enjoyed spending time in nature. But, to be quite honest, for most of that time, I didn't really spend the effort necessary to get to know it very well. If I had behaved like this in the equivalent version of a romantic relationship, my partner would have left years ago. Fortunately nature is a much more patient partner than any human can ever be. When I turned away, nature reached out; when I got lost, nature came looking. As in a romantic relationship, so much about this one turns on close attention, and so I have been training myself in its practice. I think it's made a difference. I can only guess why, but I've really upped my game during the pandemic. Well, or maybe nature upped theirs. You'll note that, as part of a conscious effort to shift my thinking, I've started using gender-neutral pronouns for nature and its occupants. As that pronoun shift comes more naturally, I can feel my perspective changing. And, you know, I actually do feel a little less lonely.

Part of my recent increase in attention is trying to learn more about trees. Maybe you know your trees, but it pains me to say that tree knowledge until recently was quite elementary. Sure, I knew a little—for example, I could identify an oak, but usually not the species of oak. But I've been working on it, and maybe I've progressed from elementary school as far as middle school.

About a week ago, I met a new tree. They live beside the trail that loops around Lake Wintergreen in West Rock State Park. To make a long story short, my new tree friend is an American hornbeam. Another name for the American hornbeam is musclewood, which is a reference to the appearance of the trunk. I'd only met one tree of this species before, a cultivar who lives in my neighborhood. This new musclewood is the first I have met in the wild. Here's the thing: I have walked past that tree dozens of times. Before, it was just another tree in the forest. I don't know how or why that tree finally got my attention. But because they did, they stand out. They have a name. We have something of a "meet cute" story, which gives us the beginning of a history together, and I now feel invested in their future. Last week I recounted this story to my spiritual director, and they noted how excited I was when I told it. It makes sense. Thomas Berry said that species are modes of divine presence. If that's true, then that day I met God.

In this age of loneliness, our relationships with other species might just save our lives.

In this era of storms, human relationships with other species might just save all lives.

Notes

¹ E. O. Wilson, quoted in *Orion*, summer 2022, 1. This issue is available online at <https://orionmagazine.org/issue/summer-2022/> (accessed October 2, 2022). Some portions are available without a subscription.

² From the issue description on the *Orion* website at <https://orionmagazine.org/issue/summer-2022/> (accessed October 2, 2022).

³ Natalie Middleton, “The Age of Plutonium,” *Orion*, summer 2022, 10-11. This article is available online at <https://orionmagazine.org/article/age-of-plutonium/> (accessed October 2, 2022).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ Jeff Berardelli, “How climate change is making hurricanes more dangerous,” Yale Climate Connections, July 8, 2019, available online at https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/07/how-climate-change-is-making-hurricanes-more-dangerous/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwyt-ZBhCNARIsAKH1175ZBF3vbln_f1v8xWOk_qRopUvpDvRG-uddg6VoLSzCF-ApPM4mv78aAshbEALw_wcB (accessed October 2, 2022).

⁶ Tricia Gates Brown, “Our problem isn’t just loneliness—it’s species loneliness,” *The Christian Century*, January 22, 2020, available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/our-problem-isn-t-just-loneliness-it-s-species-loneliness> (accessed October 2, 2022).

⁷ “Richard Louv on ‘Our Species Loneliness,’” North Cascades Institute, November 13, 2019, available online at <https://blog.ncascades.org/naturalist-notes/our-species-loneliness/#:~:text=The%20term%20species%20loneliness%20was,books%20about%20ecology%20and%20bioregionalism> (accessed October 2, 2022).

⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkwee Editions).

⁹ Thomas Berry, as found in *The Sacred Earth: Writers on Nature and Spirit*, Jason Gardner, ed. (Novato, Ca.: New World Library, 1998), p. 121.

¹⁰ Kavitha Yarlagadda, “How religious worship is boosting conservation in India,” BBC, July 26, 2022, available online at https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220726-how-religious-worship-is-boosting-conservation-in-india?ocid=global_future_rss&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=How%20religious%20worship%20is%20boosting%20conservation%20in%20India&utm_campaign=ni_newsletter (accessed October 2, 2022).

¹¹ Lynette Wilson, “At Lambeth Palace, bishops and spouses celebrate launch of Anglican Communion forest initiative,” Episcopal News Service, August 3, 2022, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/08/03/at-lambeth-palace-bishops-and-spouses-celebrate-launch-of-anglican-communion-forest-initiative/> (accessed October 2, 2022).