Worship from an Eco-Justice Perspective

For 20 years – 2000 to 2020 – I was privileged to serve as the executive director of Eco-Justice Ministries, and to write a weekly commentary, ***Eco-Justice Notes*** . During Lent in 2013, ***Notes*** had a seven-week series on worship from an eco-justice perspective. Each week examined one quality of worship, and how an Earth-aware, justice-seeking perspective might inform our worship experience.

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Worship and Awe

God's creation is astonishing and awe-inspiring, an intricate web of relationships through which life flows. When we are aware of the creation around us and within us, we will respond in worship-full ways: praise and thanks, delight and joy, wonder and humility, love and respect.

When we are aware of the creation around us and within us, our faith and worship will be "environmental" at the very deepest levels. That is true of our personal spirituality, and in our collective gathering for congregational worship.

When we are caught up, though, in the urbanized, technological, materialistic culture of our day, then it is remarkably easy to be oblivious to the creation. When our primary way of experiencing the world is as consumers, as users of resources, then creation does not stir our souls, and our worship is diminished. When we are unaware of the ecological web of life that sustains us, and when we never even glimpse the vast scope of creation, then our worship becomes privatized and shallow.

The challenge in our churches is to nurture and evoke the experience and awareness of creation. Talking ***about*** creation is a small part of that. Guiding our communities into vivid connections with creation will inspire responses that enrich and transform the way we worship God.

The path to Earth-aware worship begins outside the church sanctuary, at times other than Sunday morning.

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Psalm 8 speaks from the gut about awe and praise. "O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

The psalm's poetic praise expresses a universal religious experience of people before the invention of the electric light. Until very recently, almost everyone would see the full glory of the night sky. The beauty and splendor of that sight "puts us in our place" as we come to grips with the mind-boggling scope of the universe. Today, though, light pollution hides the stars, and we're so busy and distracted that we rarely look up anyway.

Authentic worship requires the sense of awe. When that is lost and lacking, churches must provide or help us recover that experience. Take a group of church folk away from the worst of the lights, and lie on the grass in a park on a dark night. Or sit for hours on the ocean shore. Or take the time to soak up the deep time expressed in ancient redwoods or layers of rock. An earthquake or a storm might break into our lives with the realization that we're not in control all the time.

It is wonderful when church groups can go to share those experiences, and to explore their feelings together. It is good when churches create occasions to help us remember vividly when we have had such experiences. A spirituality retreat can help us re-collect our memories and feelings – not only in our heads, but in our hearts and souls.

When we talk together as a community of faith about awe-some times, when that becomes a shared experience of the community, then our congregational worship is changed. The words of a worship service – in scripture and prayers and sermons, in hymns and anthems – can then draw out what we know within our bones.

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"Nature deficit disorder" describes a new human condition. Kids don't play in the woods anymore. Manicured lawns don't have bugs to watch, and songbirds rarely grace our neighborhoods.

The world around us is often treated as a setting to do our own thing, not as a place to encounter God and nature. Joggers circle parks with earbuds and music. Climbers set out to conquer Colorado's high mountains and check off another peak on the list of "14ers" without pausing to see the wildlife or smell the flowers.

We don't know where our food comes from – and agribusiness works hard to make sure that we don't know about the inhumane treatment of animals, the abuse of farm workers, the chemicals and ecological damage that are involved in our food supply. When tomatoes and strawberries are available year-round, we miss out on the delight of seasonable blessings.

We are blind to ecological relationships. Most folk in our congregations and communities don't see the connection between sterile lawns and the absence of bug-eating birds. When we don't see the complexity of the web of life, we will be insensitive to the wondrous and essential ways that coral reefs sustain life through the oceans.

If we seek to have worship in our churches that is attentive to God's creation, then we have to make the creation part of our everyday experience. We have to treat "nature deficit disorder" so that our worship can name and celebrate the blessings and wonder and life that is all around us, and within us. What we name in the church service, then, is an authentic expression of our delight and compassion in the world.

For the sake of authentic worship, our congregations can help people have gardens that provide food and attract bees. We can support farmer's markets. We can encourage church members to slow down, to have enough Sabbath in their lives so that they can listen to the birds and crickets, or walk slowly through the woods and smell the leaves decaying into soil. Churches can invite bird watchers to post a list of the species that are present each season. Fellowship groups can go to the zoo or a wildlife habitat – not to gawk at the exotic beasts – but to appreciate how each unique part of God's creation fits into a place and a life community. The church grounds can emphasize native plants.

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Worship is an act of praise and gratitude, of commitment and service. Worship is what we hope happens in the context of liturgy. Our words and rituals are not worship. They are some of the tools that we use to guide us into the emotional, spiritual, cognitive and bodily ways that worship flows in us and though us.

In today's world – where we don't see the stars or feel the changing seasons, where we buy our food frozen and boxed, where we never venture into the woods or the prairie – churches must employ new tools to stimulate genuine worship. In order for us to praise God, the creator and sustainer of life, pastors and spiritual leaders must go beyond the Sunday morning sanctuary. "Environmental worship" requires vivid and shared experiences of God's creation that fill us with awe and delight and thanks and humility.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Listening

A psalm says, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." (51:15) But our worship will be misguided if all of the emphasis is on what we say and do.

Genuine worship, transformative worship, worship that is relevant in this time of Earth's great distress will involve a great deal of careful listening. What's more, such worship will, in turn, lead us toward more attentive lives that are able to hear fresh news about God in the world.

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Last Sunday, tens of thousands of citizens gathered in Washington, DC, to demand action on climate change, and to rally against the Keystone XL pipeline. I didn't make the trip to the East – tempting as that was – and chose instead to be part of a parallel rally held here in Denver. Our group was much smaller, but equally passionate.

At the rally, I heard truth from a 12-year-old. This young man spoke for those who are just beginning to grow up in a world that is already damaged by pollution and climate change. He rapped, "The ruling generation's gotta wake up now, and our generation's gonna show you how." And I heard truth from two young Native American women, representing the "Idle No More" movement in Canada and the US. They spoke of broken treaties, threatened communities, and devastated forests and polluted water in ancestral lands.

These were authentic voices speaking from personal experiences very different from my own. Their words did not dwell on scientific facts, or focus on actions to be taken by the President and Congress. They spoke to me with a more basic truth about the profound damage being inflicted on our world, and about the culture that knowingly and intentionally is causing that devastation. They pulled me outside of my own experience and my own self-interest with their testimony, and that was a holy thing.

It pains me to realize that such voices are rarely, if ever, part of our worship. These youth are not invited to stand in the pulpit with their words of truth, and those who preach seldom quote or affirm such a message. The racial minorities and the poor who are most impacted by urban pollution are not given voice in most congregations, and their experience is not named in sermons or prayers. The impoverished multitudes of the world, the billions living on one or two dollars a day, are not heard or mentioned. Nor, of course, do we hear from other-than-human species. (I would love to hear stories that prove me wrong about this!)

When we do not hear – when we have not taken the initiative to listen – then we are oblivious to truth about God's world. When we do not listen to such witnesses, we have closed off paths of revelation about the state of God's creation, and about our broken and warped relationships with our fellow creatures. When we do not hear from a wide range of voices and experiences, then our worship and prayer is dangerously limited.

In our society, we are inundated with messages that reinforce the status quo. At every turn, we encounter the merchandising of commercial media telling us of our obligation to buy and consume. The news is filled with the endless musings of the "very serious" political commentators who reference each other and repeat the conventional wisdom. In our neighborhoods, at work, and even at church we generally hear the parochial perspectives of people who are very much like us. As a result, we are never stretched and challenged by distressing news or bold possibilities.

In a world like ours, the voice of God is likely to have a lot of distressing news and bold possibilities. The voice of God will not sound like the false prophets, the ones who promise "peace, peace when there is no peace," and who assure us that we're fine if we just go buy the latest products. Our God – who we say has a "preferential option for the poor" – will speak to us through the marginalized and the powerless, and so we need to seek out those who don't get airtime on the talk shows. Among all the voices, we need to practice careful discernment to sort out the true prophetic witness from the false, and to filter out distorted messages of denial and comfort.

Marjorie Proctor-Smith wrote about the dangers of an insular women's spirituality, and her words are relevant for all of us who are thoroughly steeped in our own culture. "Privileged white women risk replicating in the process and

content of prayer the classist and racist practices that benefit us. All women's groups run the risk of trading religious, social, and political transformation for our personal spiritual comfort." Unless we are informed, challenged and inspired by those with different experiences, we are likely to find ourselves worshipping a god of our own making.

When we do broaden our experience, though, we can find a very different type of worship experience. Diann Neu, a founder of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, wrote, "Ecofeminist liturgies invite communities to listen to nature, to live in right relation with all creation, and to take up the cause of justice for the Earth. They offer new awareness of body, symbol, language, music, environment, the Divine, and creation consciousness." She reminds us that such attentive listening – to others, and to parts of ourselves that we have denied – opens us to new joy in faith.

Theologian H. Paul Santmire offers up a similar promise in "Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis". The sort of worship that he describes springs from countercultural communities, and "moves those who participate in it faithfully to hear and respond to the voices of all the voiceless creatures of God's good earth and indeed attunes them to hear the groaning of the whole creation."

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Pastors who seek to lead worship and preach sermons that are faithful and relevant must find ways to listen to challenging voices, and to bring those voices into the shared worship experience. But if the minister is the only one who empowers those voices, and if the congregation only hears that message during the Sunday morning service, then little will change. (Except, perhaps, for the firing of that rabble-rousing pastor!)

Listening for God's revelation is a task of the whole congregation that extends far beyond the hour of liturgy. The whole church must work to hear and evaluate diverse testimonies. A local church can start that process by affirming the importance, value and reality of the voices that we so seldom hear. Members of the church can be encouraged to share stories they have heard in the news, to teach about different perspectives on faith and ethics, and to raise prayers for all of creation.

In a church with faithful and relevant worship, the whole congregation will listen for contemporary revelation – and they will listen for timely words from scripture that are rarely read. Within church programs and publications, and in daily lives of church members, the dominant messages of our society will be critiqued, and intentional efforts will be made to hear, respect and understand those who might speak the word of God for our time.

In this time when God's creation is being damaged and destroyed, the worship life of churches must be informed and shaped by careful listening to those who speak God's truth. Only when we listen carefully to the rich variety of voices can our worship can our worship fully proclaim God's praise.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Lament

Lament is an essential component of worship that is environmentally relevant, but even I don't want to go there every week. Lamenting requires that we come face-to-face with profound grief, and I don't have the strength to do that on a regular basis. But if our worship is to be genuine, we all must enter into that painful place on occasion.

In worship, we open ourselves fully and honestly to God – heart, soul and mind. If we set forth to encounter the divine, we cannot expect that the experience always will be joyous, orderly or predictable. There are times when placing ourselves in the presence of what is ultimately real and true will call forth unspeakable sadness and hurt.

Consider the progression that I've outlined so far in this series about creation-aware worship.

(1) First there is the awe, wonder, delight, and thanks that springs from an experience of God's creation. When we see the spread of stars, when we recognize the interdependence of the complex web of life, when we recognize our lives as a gift, then our worship is filled with gratitude and humility.
(2) Listening beyond our own experience keeps us honest about the world that we live in. The witness of youth and the marginalized from around the planet, the testimony of scientists, the cry of other species – all these announce that creation is "damaged, depleted and destabilized." Attentive listening forces us to acknowledge the injustice, death and devastation that now flow through the creation.

What else, then, can we do but lament? The creation that God loves, the creation that sustains us and that we celebrate with thanks is being poisoned and demolished. The scope and rate of this destruction is unprecedented.

Climate destabilization threatens agriculture and the foundations of human civilization. It is warping ecological relationships and natural systems. An honest assessment of where we are heading says that people at the end of this century will not have what we would consider to be a livable world. Stop for a moment and admit that reality to yourself.

Half of Earth's species may be gone within the lifetime of children now alive. Stop for a moment and consider that sentence.

The grief is personal and immediate. A friend wrote to me this week about the intense loss she feels as her child and grandchild move far away. Flights to the other side of the world for a visit would knowingly contribute to global warming that will directly harm her beloved offspring. "What tears my heart is my very real sense that the most loving thing I can do for my grandchild – not to mention the most faithful thing I can do as a Christian – is the thing that means I will not be present with her as she grows."

What can we do but lament? We can live in denial, and refuse to acknowledge the truth. We can try to hold reality at bay by intellectualizing it so that it never touches our hearts and souls. But denial and avoidance are not the way to worship God.

As we lay ourselves bare before God in worship, we must touch the unspeakable agony of this time. If our worship is genuine, we must lament.

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Lament is not pleasant. It will not fit comfortably into the tidy and predictable liturgy of Sunday morning church services. True lamentation expresses the deepest grief and loss.

The prophet Jeremiah is the Bible's expert on lamentation. His warnings show what profound loss and grief feel like. His images are painfully relevant to Earth's near future.

> "Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone. I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant." (9:10-11)
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> "O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only child, most bitter lamentation: for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us." (6:26)

It is not only Jeremiah, "Mr. Doom-and-Gloom", who laments. In the Psalms, the hymnal of the Bible, 56 of the 150 chapters are categorized as individual or community laments. As a seminary professor told us, "The psalms are more honest with God than we want to be." If we are true to our scriptural heritage, faithfulness requires us to cry out in grief and anger when we experience suffering, injustice and loss.

When our world and our lives are falling apart, lament is an expression of honesty. Preaching professor Christine Smith wrote, "People weep when they are alive to those things they cherish and value the most and are touched by something they can hardly name or utter."

Grief cuts through numbness and denial. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. ... And as long as the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism."

When we are honest before God, we do know that things are not right. Lament gives voice to that realization. It is not analysis, or blaming, or problem solving. It is simply the gut-level, unfiltered wailing when we see that all the things that we love and need are falling apart.

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I know that I cannot bear the thought of a weekly dose of full-bore lament. Yet I also know that I must enter into that pain more deeply, honestly and frequently than I do now. I have to break through my own denial and intellectualizing.

If our churches are to be faithful and relevant, they must provide ways – within caring and structured settings of community – for congregation members to enter into grief. In pastoral settings, retreats, special worship services, and regular liturgy we can delve into various layers and depths of our loss and lamenting.

There is a desperate need for new rituals and orders of worship that will minister to those in our churches those who do know and feel the pain of creation. We need opportunities to gather together where we can weep, pour out our grief, sob and cry out from the center of our being, and where that heartfelt lament can be blessed and honored. (At the end of this Lenten series, I will point toward some resources that include a mix of these necessary worship elements. Your suggestions and recommendations are much appreciated!)

In her book "Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil", Christine Smith says that sermons can evoke some parts of the grief. Pastors can begin to introduce their folk to lamenting on Sunday morning. "I wanted the community to ***experience*** some of the pain and challenge described in various illustrations and stories rather than simply hearing 'about' it. To weep passionately, we must experience and feel." Such sermons will not open up full lamenting, but they will be far more emotional than the neck-up rationality of most preaching.

In prayers of the congregation, pastors and church members can name the situations of creation's loss with enough detail that our emotions are stirred and we are called to lament.

If the trauma being inflicted on creation does not bring us to tears, if we never break through denial and rational barriers to feel our hearts breaking, if we are not at times overwhelmed with grief, then we have not entered into honest worship.

Lament is both difficult and necessary. In our worship and spirituality, may we find the courage to grieve.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Confession

A wise professor taught the course I took in seminary on the US abolitionist movement of the mid-1800s. He made it through the entire semester without talking about slaves. Rather, Horace was diligent in using the term "enslaved Africans."

His point in that language – as he made very clear on several occasions – is that the people who needed liberation did not just happen to be slaves, and their being slaves was not an expression of how things have to be. Human beings were bought, sold, owned, exploited and abused because of choices that other people made. They were enslaved by the actions of individuals, and by the laws and customs of society. It didn't just happen.

We need to be intentional with a similar shift in language and thought today. Species are not just going extinct, they are being driven into extinction. Asthma rates are astronomically high in some communities, not by accident, but because human-created soot and ozone are causing respiratory diseases. The planet is warming so rapidly because it is being heated by the greenhouse gasses released by our society. There are very specific causes for the things that we lament.

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Last week, I wrote about lament as an essential component of environmentally relevant worship. "As we lay ourselves bare before God in worship, we must touch the unspeakable agony of this time. If our worship is genuine, we must lament." The crying out, a gut-level expression of loss and pain, "is not analysis, or blaming, or problem solving."

It is essential that we lament, and it is also essential that worship goes beyond lamenting. The devastation of God's creation isn't happening without cause. It is not the way things have to be. It is not inevitable. Creation is being ravaged by the actions of individuals, and by the laws and customs of society – of our society.

After we lament, we must move into analysis, and if we are honest we will admit that we are deeply complicit in the very destruction that we grieve. The world is not just falling apart, it is being damaged, depleted and destabilized. We – individually and collectively – are the ones who are causing that damage. In the context of the current crisis of ecological loss and environmental injustice, heart-felt confession is a necessary companion to lament. Our pain at Earth's distress should be mirrored in pain at our complicity in that damage.

In 1996, the Presbyterian Church (USA) approved a major document, "Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development." The book's introduction states, "The report is a confession of our individual and social sins of omission and commission. It is also a call for fundamental reforms in the churches, United States government policy, and the international economic order." The confession is spelled out as chapter after chapter details the causes and impacts of global poverty, inequality and ecological degradation.

Deeply rooted in the Reformed theological tradition, the Presbyterian document does not shy away from themes of sin and judgment. "'Sin' may be an antiquated word to some in our culture, but the phenomenon it describes is the ever-contemporary power behind economic depredations and ecological plunderings all over the world."

As Horace reminded us about slavery, the reports says, "Sin is manifested not only in individuals, but in social institutions and cultural patterns. ... Because they are pervasive and generally invisible, they compel our participation. ... Whether or not we deserve blame as individuals and churches for these social sins depends in part on whether we defend or resist, tolerate or reject, them."

Confession names our participation in the systems of devastation. It acknowledges – from the heart and soul – that many of the personal choices we each make are deepening and hastening damage to creation. Confession admits, too, that we each have a mix of intentional and unintentional involvement in a society which is inherently exploitative and destructive.

Confession joins with lament when we cry out that we are caught up in an economic and cultural system that gives us few positive choices. When we honestly evaluate our environmental footprint – where almost all of us are demanding far more of the planet than can be sustained – we must confess our personal and collective sin. Confession is an essential part of worship that is relevant to our situation.

Several years ago, I was scheduled to be the guest preacher at a local congregation. Based on the materials that I sent for the Sunday bulletin, a member of the staff wrote to let me know that, "in this church, we do not talk about sin or punishment. We talk about choices and consequences, but we do not use shaming language."

It seemed to me then, and it still seems to me now, that it is extremely difficult to deal honestly with the state of the world without mentioning sin. It is hard to have worship that is faithful and relevant without confession. "Choices and consequences" don't allow us to explore the depth of our participation in systems that are destroying the planet.

"Sin" – especially as an acknowledgment of systemic realities – does not have to be a shaming term. Confessing our sin is a liberating act.

Programs as diverse as 12-step addiction recovery and the restorative justice movement recognize that nothing will change until those who have caused harm admit wrong-doing to themselves and to others. Without confession there is no accountability. Problems are blamed on others, or the situation is seen as inevitable and inescapable.

Confession admits that we are part of the problem. Confession opens the door to forgiveness, repentance and transformation. Confession is an essential step toward accepting the healing grace of God.

An article on the "Web of Creation" website (no longer available) affirms: "Through the rituals and events of worship, we find ourselves restored to right relationships. ... By confession and forgiveness, we seek to overcome our self-alienation and the brokenness of our relationships."

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Worship that is relevant in this time of environmental devastation will include confession – serious confession. A superficial statement hoping for cheap grace won't do it. A generic unison prayer – "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done" – is not sufficient.

The sort of confession that is necessary is not easy or comfortable. It will create some conflict in most churches when prayers admit to our personal and collective addiction to the fossil fuels that are causing global heating and ocean acidification. Church members may hesitate when reading a litany which confesses that our prosperity and comfort are stealing life from future generations. It is hard for any of us to admit that we have been seduced and controlled by our materialistic consumer society. It is painful to acknowledge that we have denied and ignored our damaging impacts on creation. But that is as it should be. Genuine confession is supposed to be hard and painful.

Pastors and educators must be careful and intentional in laying good foundations for substantial and specific confession, especially in congregations that have tended toward feel-good theologies of affirmation. Before people can be honest in confession, they need to understand – theologically and pastorally – how admitting to sin is healing and transformative. In many churches, there will need to be pastoral education about the difference between being a "bad person" and participating in a destructive culture.

Confession is an essential element of worship that is relevant and transformative in this time of global crisis. We are part of the problem, and we must confess our complicity within our personal spirituality and in our collective worship.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Imagination

The qualities of worship that I've outlined in the last few weeks may not seem very appealing. Why make the trip to church on Sunday morning if it is all about lament and confession? Where's the joy and celebration in that?

Indeed, if worship stalls at those necessary but painful stages, then we've missed the point. The next step in the process – imagination – is where we discover, explore and appropriate the good news that is central to the Christian faith.

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The imagination that we need to infuse and energize worship is very specifically theological. This imagination fills out the promise that we can be different – individually, in community, and as a society. That possibility of

transformational change provides the hope which is a joyful contrast to our lament and confession about how things are now.

The richness of theological imagination is not being brought into play when we lift up fairly conventional good news. Helpful changes in technology are good, but higher fuel economy standards for cars and more power from renewable sources just skim the surface of real imagination. Behavior changes are helpful and necessary, but biking to work and recycling don't begin to describe the transformative promise of faith.

At the very core of the Christian faith is the proclamation that we can be transformed, that we can be made new. By God's grace, we can turn from the sin that we confess and live by a completely different set of values and priorities. The realm of God upends the principles and incentives that now dominate us. God's shalom of peace and right relationship provides the vision of a world that is socially and ecologically restored.

The power of imagination allows us to believe, not just that we can do a few things differently, but that we can tell a new story about who we are. The promise of the gospel is not that we can be better consumers, it is that we can stop seeing ourselves primarily as consumers in the first place. Transformation lets us shift from a fixation on ourselves as individuals, and adopt a new identity where we are members of God's Earth community, living in relationship with all creatures now, and far into the future.

Worship that simply reminds us to do the basics of environmental responsibility, or to push the boundaries a bit with some political advocacy, is not providing the transformational imagination that we need in this time of great crisis. The hope and promise that we lift up in worship must be adequate to the despair and wrong that surround us. When we gather to praise the God who makes all things new, we need to be bold in imagining what that newness involves. We must imagine real transformation, personally and of our cultures.

About a month ago, Canadian Mennonite University held what appears to have been a marvelous symposium titled "Worship+Imagination". The introduction on their website shows the necessity of connecting these two themes:

> "For Christians, it's only by means of imagination that we can see reality whole, complete; that we can see the shalom imagined by God. Otherwise we are left only with fragments and brokenness. ... In worship, imagination ushers us into wonder and praise and into the mysteries of God. Worship as an act of imagination enables us to make connections ... Worship helps us to imagine the whole amidst the brokenness. Like Jesus did. Through worship we rediscover our lives, our world, and the whole of creation as God's imaginative work."

Josh Anway made a similar assertion at Seattle Pacific Seminary. "I think that when we worship we are entering into a vast landscape of imagination, and it is the most powerful engine of our transformation." He continued: "to orient our desires in the right direction, we place the vibrant power of our imagination in line with what God has promised us as real, over and over again ... One of the reasons imagination is so powerful is that it allows us to hold the tension of the already and the not yet in one place. What we imagine becomes real to us, and gradually shapes the way we live. And worship is one of the ways that we nurture that imagination."

The phrase "another world is possible" is a powerful affirmation of imagination. The phrase has informed the Occupy movement, it has been the slogan of the annual World Social Forum, and it has long been used by the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. It announces a transformational imagination that resonates both within the church and outside it.

Blogger Matt Wiebe wrote, "The type of imagination that the Gospel should engender within us is that another world is possible, and we should be trying much harder to cultivate that imagination." John Allen wrote, "Paul exhorts us to understand that, as Children of God, we have been torn from slavish adherence to common discourse and given the capacity to imagine that other worlds are possible."

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Our theological imagination, if it is to be helpful in calling us toward faithful transformation, must be vivid and specific. The way we celebrate the realm of shalom has to go beyond vague platitudes, but theological imagination

is very different from a policy statement. As Walter Brueggemann has described the prophetic imagination, "We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is ***imaginable***."

Can we imagine that a society living in justice and peace is actually good news? The delightful description of God's shalom provided in Zechariah 8 opens our ability to envision such a thing with some enticing detail.

Can we imagine – as we align ourselves with God's purposes – that it is possible to slash our culture's use of fossil fuels by 80% or more? I don't expect pastors and educators to delve into the technical details of energy policies, but church programs can invite us to image how our personal and collective lives might be different and more faithful in the presence of such dramatic change.

Can we imagine the theological promise that the good life is found in community and relationship, and not in a chasing after more and better things? Can we imagine that there is real joy in profoundly simplifying our lives so that God's creation can thrive?

This type of creative thinking can be cultivated. In a Notes several years ago, I outlined some specific and practical ways to stimulate our imagination. Included in that list is the need to draw on the vivid, challenging and transformational imagination that flows through scripture. The Bible excels in describing both the troubles of the world and the hope for the different world that is God's reality.

N.T. Wright said, "The Bible helps us, enables us, to understand, to re-appropriate, to celebrate the role of the imagination as part of our redeemed, renewed, image-bearing humanness. You need imagination to live in God's world. The Christian church has often been bad at encouraging imagination."

If our worship is to be faithful and relevant in this time of great crisis, if we are to honestly and fully open ourselves to the transformative love and grace of God, then our worship must be filled with imagination. In this world that drives us to lament and confession, our worship will be filled with hope and joy when we begin to imagine how to claim dramatically new identities for ourselves and our culture.

Without imagination, our worship stalls in grief and hopelessness. With imagination, worship draws us into new identities and new ways of living in relationship.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Commitment

What does it take to have worship that is profoundly relevant in this time of global emergency? Do we need to throw out centuries of theology and spiritual practice and create something entirely new?

In the often-spoken and rarely-practiced words of scripture, let me say "Fear not!" Through the last five weeks, I've been spelling out ways that churches today need to deepen and focus our worship, but none of the themes that I've outlined are foreign to traditional patterns of liturgy. Awe, listening, lament, confession, and imagination have always been essential elements of worship that is faithful, engaging and transformative.

So, too, the sixth quality – commitment – is both very familiar and sorely lacking. In most churches, we need to be far more intentional and challenging with this central aspect of religious life.

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In the theology of my "free church" religious tradition, the flow of a service of worship is often based on the Bible's story of the call of the prophet Isaiah. As told in Is. 6, he had a once-in-a-lifetime experience in the Jerusalem temple. The story begins with awe and praise, moves into lament and confession, both personal and collective

("Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."), and then culminates in the prophet's response. God asks, "Whom shall I send?" and Isaiah blurts, "Here am I; send me!"

Unlike so many of the biblical stories of call, which are filled with hesitation, resistance, deflection and reluctance, Isaiah seems eager to take on the prophetic mantle. He is a good model for enthusiastic commitment as a response to God's forgiveness and the imagination of a renewed creation.

In my staid Congregational heritage, the weekly ritual of commitment, which is supposed to echo Isaiah's "Send me!", comes toward the end of the service, and involves the passing of an offering plate. That's a decent symbol and reminder of our faith commitment, but for most of us, dropping a few dollars in the plate is not a reflection of ecstatic or life-changing commitment.

A more profound liturgical expression can be seen in Evangelical churches which usually have an "altar call", an invitation for people to make a public declaration of faith and commitment. This does not have to be a one-time-only expression. It can express a new and heartfelt confession, a reaffirmation and renewal of faith, or a fresh act of dedication.

I've seen many other ways that churches have developed rituals of commitment. In the "stewardship" (or more accurately, "fund raising") season, the presentation of pledges and offerings is more challenging and intentional than the routine Sunday collection. Churches will often commission members for a special project or task – blessing those heading off for a mission trip or work camp, or installing this year's crop of teachers and church officers. Through long experience, we know that church members do make choices about how and where to serve God with intentional commitments, and we know that it is valuable to make those commitments in the context of worship where they can be affirmed by the gathered community.

Worship always provides an opportunity to declare and renew our commitments of faith. In this time of great eco-justice crisis – when "business as usual" is rushing our planet toward catastrophic depletion and destabilization – churches must find new liturgical ways to invite and affirm commitments that are proportional to our deep lament and prophetic imagination.

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For several years, Eco-Justice Ministries has stressed that there are three very different ways the churches can call their members and communities to environmental responsibility. We've given those approaches the shorthand names of "doing the basics", "leadership and action", and "transformational ministry." Because they express varying ideas about the source and depth of our environmental problems (from "we need to be responsible consumers" to "we need to change the values and institutions of our society"), the sort of commitment that is called for changes across the three approaches.

This Lent, I'll be clear about my bias in those three style of change. In keeping with the other qualities of appropriate worship for these times, churches must frequently and significantly challenge us toward transformational change, and call on us to make the commitments necessary to live into that vision.

In this year's Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast, a proposal was made for churches to affirm their members who have lived out a commitment for political action.

> "Every time your congregation gathers to worship, consider making the first announcement something like this: As we do every week, I'd like to ask those who contacted either their congress-person or the White House this past week to advocate for new laws that will make our earth sustainable to please rise - as you are able - and receive our applause. Thank you, and I hope to see all of you rise next week."

There is no end to creative possibilities. Can we develop rituals where church members stand before the congregation and vow to adopt (or even move toward) a vegetarian diet as an act of faithful creation care? Can we have special house blessing ceremonies for those who down-size their homes, or who move to a location that reduces their commuting? How about an annual "blessing of the sweaters" in the fall, as a symbol of lowered thermostats? We can commission those who are willing to engage in civil disobedience, or who are in careers (paid or volunteer) that are intentionally chosen based on eco-justice values.

In the weekly liturgy, it is important to make the connections between our common symbols and the depth of commitment that is required in these days. The invitation to the offering can stress the point I made above, that the donation dropped in the plate is a sign and a symbol of our much deeper commitment to live lives transformed by God's grace and dedicated to God's realm of shalom.

Evangelical ethicist Ron Sider admits that our weak action on environmental causes is directly tied to a weak religious commitment.

> "Obviously, God's Word compels us to become more concerned with the environment, so that means we must change. ... We need to repent of our unspoken belief that more is better ... I'm afraid that one reason Christians fail to live more simply for the sake of the poor and the environment ... is that we don't really love Jesus very much. We substitute lukewarm faith and mere tradition for a passionate love for the Lord and a radical commitment to worship and to obey [God] at any cost."

The genuine experience of worship and praise – which is often different from the Sunday morning liturgy – is always an act of commitment. When we worship God, we are dedicating ourselves to God's purposes. We are pledging ourselves to live and act in faith, and to embody love and care in our relationships with all of creation.

Commitment as an essential element of worship is nothing new. In this time of great emergency, though, Christian churches must be far more bold and creative in calling people toward deep and transformational commitments in their lives.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

Worship and Joy

What foolishness! Christians find joy on Good Friday. We celebrate on a day of brutal death. Yes, foolishness. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor. 1:25)

The Good Friday question comes around every year: How can we hold together joy and death on this day? There is a similar question that is new for our generation: How can we worship God with joy while also being honest about the devastation of God's creation?

Worship is an act of joy, and yet we are witness to – and we are participants in – climate chaos, widespread extinction, the depletion of water and soil, oceans turning so acidic that life falters. We see cancers and deformities caused by toxic chemicals, starvation in the midst of drought, devastation by monster storms, warfare stirred by conflict over scarce resources. How can we see this world, and still worship with joy?

Part of the answer is to remember that there is a vast difference between joy and happiness. In an Advent meditation several years ago, I said: "Joy is more reflective, more profound, more deep-seated, and more persistent than the fleeting experience of happiness. ... Joy is a response to good news which recognizes our life in community, and which celebrates the promise which is extended to others, even to all of creation."

I don't know how we can be honest and relevant about the trauma of the world if we expect worship to make us happy all the time. An insistence that the celebration of good news always has to make us feel good cuts out several of the worship themes that I've highlighted this Lent, especially lament and confession. Those are not fun experiences. Lament calls forth unspeakable sadness and hurt. Genuine confession is supposed to be hard and painful.

Seeking happiness may require us to live in a state of denial about the trauma of creation. But, as I said a few weeks ago, "denial and avoidance are not the way to worship God."

Joy, on the other hand, can nurture and sustain us even as we deal with realities that are painful. Through joy, we may choose to place ourselves in the presence of hurt and suffering, and even find that we could do nothing else. When worship is filled with joy, then we can acknowledge and celebrate the full range of life – joyous awe and burning grief, confession and commitment, hope and loss.

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I have heard about people who decided never to enter into a committed relationship because it would be too hard for them when the other died. These folk have turned away from committing to a spouse or partner, or to a pet. They know that there would be happiness in the relationship, but the prospect of death at the end is more than these people can bear.

On the other hand, several of my good friends have made the choice to marry someone with a late-stage terminal illness. When they considered their beloved's stages of dying, and thought about all of the caretaking and emotional turmoil of those months or years, they could not imagine how they could possibly turn away. My friends speak of difficult times and occasions of wonderful delight, of both tears and laughter, while they journeyed with their spouse to the end of life. Hard? Yes, of course, but also joyous because they can travel that path together. The joy of living fully in love and relationship makes all of those difficulties meaningful. Their joy has been found, not in avoiding suffering, but in being present through it.

There is an enormous difference between joy and happiness. Joy allows us to sit in the presence of pain and death, to be emotionally and spiritually vulnerable in the presence of grief and suffering. We can be there, we can choose to be there, because that is where God is. That is where God calls us to be, too.

The joy of living fully in relationship with God – which is the joy that inspires our deepest worship – allows us to open ourselves to the horrors happening around us. Precisely because we love God, because we have aligned ourselves with God's purposes of shalom, because we cherish to intricate beauty of the fragile web of life, we choose to make ourselves aware of the death at work all around us. Because our joy is rooted in God, we open ourselves to both the beauty and the painful truth about God's creation, and we commit ourselves to be agents of God's justice and reconciliation in a broken world.

When God's creation is being mangled and exploited, our love of God calls us to place ourselves in the presence of the pain. 2,000 years ago, as Jesus was crucified, the women gathered at the foot of the cross. In a similar way, love compels us to be present with the suffering of creation, even finding joy when we do not turn away.

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The Empire wants us to seek happiness. Those who use up and exploit creation are able to increase their profit and power when we think of ourselves as "consumers". They can continue to manipulate us when we focus on our own desires and pleasure, when we seek our own entertainment and status, when we think that acquiring more stuff will make us happy.

The governments and corporations and power-brokers who are the face of Empire today work hard to hide creation's suffering. They use all the tricks they can muster to make us believe that there's nothing wrong, that this is the way it is supposed to be, that it is inevitable. They will not reveal their flood of toxic chemicals and the spread of unnatural genes and the abuse of creatures. They try to convince us that the purpose of life is to be happy, to feel good, to look out for ourselves.

When we accept those lies of the Empire, we may think that worship is one more piece of consumer culture. We'll want to shop around for a church where we can be happy, meet our own needs, and never have to face anything unpleasant. If we accept the "human wisdom" of consumer culture, then a church should never, ever mention the devastation of God's creation that is happening all around us.

Good Friday is a reminder that the church of the Empire is not the Christian church. The church that follows Jesus, that lives in the prophetic heritage, that continues the New Testament path of resistance to the false gods of Empire –

that "foolish" church has its birth on a cross. Our church begins with nails and blood and agony and death, and then has the chutzpah to call it "good". We know that our calling is not to be happy.

On our best and most faithful days, the church enters knowingly and willingly into all of the places where God's beloved creation is suffering. And we count it as joy to be able to be present, even in the midst of pain and grief and death.

Christian worship, when it is faithful and relevant, will be so filled with joy in the presence of God that we will insist on being present and active in midst of both great beauty and profound sorrow. Our worship, filled and empowered by joy, will encompass the whole range of God's creation, even in this time of creation's suffering.

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Through Lent, I have tried to explore some qualities of Christian worship that is richly ecological and transformational. It should be clear, by now, that I have not been giving tips for how to do a once-a-year "environmental" service.

We are living in an unprecedented time. Earth's natural systems are being ruined. The web of life is being pulled apart. The planet is being depleted and poisoned and overheated. Humanity has never seen such a disruption of global life systems.

This is a time that calls the church to rethink and reclaim our central and most important act. If we are to be faithful, we must be drawn into a far deeper and more encompassing life of worship. The way we nurture genuine worship will often reach far beyond Sunday morning liturgy. The church today must help connect us with awe, engage us in listening to a wide range of witnesses, free us to lament deeply, bring us to confession and open us to forgiveness, stimulate bold prophetic imagination, move us to strong commitment, and fill us with joy.

That is the worship that is honest for both Good Friday and Easter. That is the worship that is relevant for a planet in crisis.

Shalom!
Peter Sawtell

This document is available on-line at:
https://www.RevSawtell.org/Worship_from_an_Eco-Justice_Perspective.pdf
You can go to www.RevSawtell.org, and look under the list of Congregations Alive! resources.