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Delivered virtually on Sunday, June 20, 2021

Thinking Like a (Holy) Mountain

A couple of years back, while on spring break from seminary, I was staying with some friends up in Huntington, Vermont, who run a 1,200-acre vegan permaculture farm and duck sanctuary. It's adjacent to Camel's Hump State Park, if you know where that is. Beautiful place. The idea really was to get out of my head for a week and just enjoy the surroundings—hike the property, help care for the ducks, swim the pond, pick and devour berries—and just really connect with the land. I was not two days into this little retreat when I overheard my friends discussing some goings-on over in Montpelier. There was a bill there, a very modest bill, that members of the Vermont State House's Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife Committee were trying to advance out of committee. But they were encountering some strange resistance.

The bill in question was H.357 (now H.411), known also as the Wanton Waste of Wildlife bill, and its rather straightforward aim was to make it illegal to kill wildlife without a good-faith intention to "use" the animals' body for meat or fur. But even in this pitiful modesty it managed to elicit remarkable resistance, and it stirred great antipathy toward the range of creatures it remains perfectly legal in the state to kill without reason or limitation. In very short order, my little retreat ended. I was quickly drawn into this contentious political battle, and I found myself among a very unusual alliance of hunters and vegans at the capitol showing up in support of this bill.

As I sat in the hearing room and listened to testimony after testimony referring to our fellow creatures as "its" and "thats," trafficking amply in the use of othering terms like "invasive" and "pests," I began to wonder, against the better judgment of my costly conditioning, What kind of justice is this? What might we hear coyotes saying had we the ears to hear and eyes to see? What would a political alliance with crows look like? Such possibilities could not seem more remote, and I felt very keenly aware that even in thinking such thoughts I was perhaps in the grip of a kind of "madness."

As you know we've been talking over the past few Sundays about something which in theological parlance is known as "biblical anthropology." Despite this fancy-sounding nomenclature, all we're really talking about is how humans—and Christians, specifically—understand our role in and to the natural world. This may sound for all the world like some heady, abstract conversation, but what Scott and I have been trying to make clear is that it's actually a very practical consideration. How we understand our role in Creation doesn't just show up in sermons and theological discussions; how we understand this role actively informs decisions many of us make every single day.

Scott kicked off this sermon series with a haunting look at what a *dominion* understanding of humans' role meant for the American bison. As we know, the exercise of dominion that led to their demise was based in its entirety on an interpretation of Genesis 1:26 that seemed to many if not most people of the time to be divine sanction to conquer the wild. For exponents of this prevalent exercise of dominion theology, the ethic toward the Earth is that of conquest. So these dominionists quite literally take the admonition of Genesis 1:28 to subdue—the Hebrew word ("*kabas*") meaning conquer, enslave, even, sometimes, rape—the Earth.

Then there's the ostensibly more responsible role of stewardship. The idea here is to be some kind of manager of God's Earthly assets. Yes, I said assets, because that is, by and large, how those who subscribe to a stewardship framework see Creation. There's an accounting emphasis. You can see it in how we name

various elements of the natural world. Thus wildlife and streams and trees become "natural resources," and the "benefits" these provide are "ecosystem services." Now if this framing of the vibrant landscape, teeming with life and all manner of relationships, is personally meaningful for you, more power to you. But as Scott mentioned last week in his profoundly compelling sermon, there's a deep dysfunction at the heart of this way of seeing the natural world that renders stewardship woefully inadequate for the confluence of ecological crises in which we now find ourselves. This inadequacy has everything to do with a privileging of humankind over and against all other members of Creation.

A steward can never truly decide in the best interests of Creation because of their human-centeredness, but also because the steward sees themself as having some divinely endowed perspective that enables them to make the best decisions (which, curiously, always manages to benefit themselves above all). Another way of putting this is that a steward is at a lofty remove from Creation, looking down on it from a kind of sovereign perch. And here's the salient point: We cannot truly be in covenant with those whom we are above—those whom we do not honor in relational fellowship. At its best, a stewardship perspective seeks to conserve "natural resources" and restore Creation to a sustainable balance of life. But it is precisely the steward's privileged remove from creaturely life that disqualifies their judgment. We cannot escape our own human-centered thinking.

Is the deer population too high due to suburban sprawl? Stewardship says that many of the deer must die and sells permits to hunters to reduce the population to a scale which the steward deems acceptable. Are bears eating your cash crop? Stewardship says, go ahead and kill them. This is your income, after all, and of course a bear's life is not as important as that. Don't like how close that coyote is getting to the edge of your property? Stewardship says, go ahead, shoot her. After all, you can't be expected to tolerate the slim-to-moderate risk that she might venture onto your property and do something you don't like. In the words of Andreas Malm, "The border between needs and wants is famously porous."

As many of us know, climate and other ecological catastrophes, including mass species extinction, are now an unavoidable part of our present-day reality and will be for the foreseeable future. The Pentagon has been sounding the alarm for nearly 20 years, going so far as to tell then-president George Bush in Feb. 2004 that our rapidly changing climate poses a greater threat than terrorism. It has been sounding this warning with renewed urgency every few years since. Nasa just released bombshell findings this week showing that the amount of heat the Earth is trapping has doubled since 2005 (the year after the Pentagon issued its dire warning). If that weren't enough, according to the most comprehensive assessment of its kind to date, upward of 1,000,000 plant and animal species (out of 8,000,000 total) are expected to be extinct by the end of the century. North American skies now have about 3 billion fewer birds than they did just 50 years ago. Simply unfathomable. Utterly overwhelming. And contrary to conventional (we might even say, worldly wisdom), it is all precisely due to a stewardship model of relating to the Created order.

But critique is easy. It's easy to lay blame. What's needed is a constructive approach. We, Christians, need to embrace a new role in Creation. And there's good news on this score. When we let go of the delusional and self-serving idea that our human perspective is the best one possible to make decisions that impact all members of Creation, we take the first step toward total liberation (i.e., liberation for all of us). We need a way of relating to the wild world that sees trees, plants, and all wildlife as partners in the ongoing work of co-creating the Earth. Such is what we might call the ecological discipleship role (or discipleship, for short). In its honest, confessional openness about the limits of what we know and can accomplish on our own, discipleship creates the space necessary for the sweeping transformation this moment requires. Discipleship recognizes our

dilemma as one we share in common with nonhuman others and seeks to learn from and with them. When we embrace a discipleship approach, we take their perspectives into account in the decisions we make.

A great example of this (of potentially many) can be seen in permaculture, which is a way of listening to the land and soil and attending to their "interests" and needs in building sustainable, regenerative agrarian practices. Discipleship takes exactly this biomimetic approach, i.e., it emulates natural design processes, recognizing that there are wisdoms and intelligences far more ancient and timeless than what humankind has picked up in its relatively short time on Earth. In this way, discipleship creates space for nonhuman others to "speak" their own testimonies and bear witness to and voice their own yearnings. This is what I believe Aldo Leopold, that great conservationist, was close to realizing when he wrote his famous essay encouraging humans to begin "thinking like a mountain" for the good of the "biotic community." Of course, conservationist that he was, Leopold had an unwavering confidence in a transcendent science that humans could wield in pursuit of a land ethic. While I am immensely grateful to Leopold for his suggestion of a land ethic, I wonder if we might instead embrace a holy mountain ethic, in view of Isaiah 11.

Isaiah 11 articulates one of the most arresting political visions found anywhere in the Bible. And make no mistake: It is thoroughly political. The great prophet envisions a political order marked by a peace that permeates every creaturely relationship and dynamic. Predators lie down with their prey, who in turn trust their one-time antagonists enough to rest alongside them. And the most vulnerable of them all, a little child, leads the way. This radical vision is at once a joke and a scandal to those putative gatekeepers of the politically possible, who vigorously police the boundaries of "reality," admitting only those ideas that are familiar and certain. Does Isaiah's vision scare you? Does it excite you? Does it do both? Or do you see only impossibility, a vision better thought of as an inscrutable image we're wasting our time trying to sort out?

I could showcase current innovations in multi-species democratic theory and practice, as well as advances in Rights of Nature legal precedent in various bright spots the world over. But if you're not ready, it will seem to you just as ridiculous or unhinged as perhaps the notion does now. As Henri Bergson says, "the eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend." Isaiah says in our text that the peaceable kingdom of which he dreams cannot be determined on the basis of what eyes are seeing and ears are hearing. The challenge is not one of empirical observation but of an insight of the heart and mind, informed by the Spirit. It is the righteousness born of an awe and wonder before our Creator that will transfigure us and make us ready to embrace our calling as co-creators in a kind of democracy of species.

I suspect one of the main reasons we find it so difficult to relinquish the stewardship mantle (in addition to our undying faith in the exceptional nature of humans) is the feeling that we are not taking any action —let alone, decisive action—if we are not in full control of the outcome. Many of us have grown so accustomed to conflating doing with achieving. Stewardship makes us feel like we are in control. Discipleship, on the other hand, involves accepting that we cannot, on our own, decide what is best for the ecological communities to which we belong. A holy mountain ethic is committed to the vision, not the outcome. Relinquishing the illusion of control, and for that matter any kind of status or privilege we might arrogate to ourselves, can be hard, but it's also immensely freeing.

A holy mountain ethic is one that honors the communities of Creation as they are while working to coax these same communities and ourselves toward a vision of reality greater than what presently exists—tapping their moral imaginations, as well as ours, recognizing that such an imaginary does not serve at the pleasure of the going notions of reality; it serves at the pleasure of God's always-coming kingdom.

Among the many gifts science has given us is insight into the ethical commitments of our other-than-human neighbors one to another. (Dale Peterson, Marc Bekoff, and Jessica Pierce, to name but a few, have contributed greatly to our understanding of these relations.) Part of what it means to mimic natural processes is to emulate these ethical priorities and principles, not just their processes and designs. With even a modicum of fidelity to this work, we could rebuild Earth communities, from the soil up, in ways now scarcely imaginable.

We cannot think like a mountain in the Leopoldian sense of occupying a privileged, transcendent perch that grants us access to all the data we require to make the most precisely efficacious decision possible for whole biotic communities—let alone, the Earth. But if we fully embrace the immanent vantage of our creaturely habitation, joining our commitment to scientific learning to the gift of our moral imagination, apprenticing ourselves to the insights and experiences of our countless creaturely relations, we might yet learn to think like a holy mountain. In so doing, we will orient ourselves toward wildly transfigurative possibilities heretofore unimagined.

May it be so.