

Can This Planet Be Saved?

TEXT: Romans 8:18-25

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on April 21, 2024

As many of you know, the first church I served was in Cross City, Florida, a rural town about 50 miles west of Gainesville. As usual, the parsonage was next to the church, and living across the street was a single mom, Kathy, and her seven-year-old daughter, Casey. They weren't part of the congregation, but we built a strong bond as neighbors over our common love of animals.

It was in that congregation that I began the practice of doing a Blessing of the Animals service, designed as a counter-statement to the horrific animal abuse and neglect in the area. Kathy and Casey came to that service with Patsy, their baby Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pig, who wore a bright pink bow for the occasion. We laughed later at the innocent notion that the Patsy would remain at least somewhat on the small side as she aged.

But soon Patsy was not alone. A new friend had joined their family—a black lab puppy named, aptly, Mr. Pooper.

Among those who *were* part of the congregation were the town's veterinarians, a married couple and the town's only vets. The wife, Linda, came to me one day with a problem she faced in their practice. Cross City is a very religious town. I don't know the number today, but at the time there were over 40 churches for a population of just over 2200 people. Since Linda's practice got almost all of their pets, she frequently found herself present through the moments of deep grief and loss when it was necessary to euthanize a family's animal companion.

Of course she'd been doing that her whole career, but more and more people in those moments were asking her whether their pet would go to heaven, and she found herself stuck on how she should respond to those questions. So, she asked if I would write something that she could give to people to help. I agreed.

Going back to young Casey across the street, I had noticed that she was a budding artist, which is how she came to be the illustrator for the trifold brochure I created for Linda's grieving families called, "Will Mr. Pooper Go to Heaven?"

That little brochure launched me into the broader world of pet loss and bereavement where I ended up going to conferences to speak on the topic, notably to licensed grief therapists and counselors who, like Linda, frequently found themselves lost when trying to navigate the emotions and questions of a religious client dealing with the loss of a pet.

At a class I did at a conference for therapists and counselors in New York City, I had about 40 people in the room—all professionals trying to wrestle with the issue. They came from all kinds of religious backgrounds, including none at all. I began by asking how many of them had direct experience with losing a pet. Every hand went up. I suspected they were not all there merely on behalf of their clients.

I then asked how many of them had *negative* experiences when discussing their own grief over a pet with a religious leader. About 2/3 of the hands in the room went up. We did a quick check on religions. Jews, Christians of many kinds, Muslims. Their grief was dismissed; they were told to just get another pet, that animals didn't have souls, and the like. They were shamed for their grief.

Lastly, I asked how many had a *positive* experience discussing their grief over the loss of a pet with a religious leader. A single hand rose. I asked about her tradition. She was a Methodist.

The concern for the created order among Methodists goes all the way back to our founder, John Wesley, whose life spanned almost the entire 18th century. Those who became part of Wesley's reform movement were called "Methodists" because Wesley developed an incredibly detailed "method" for conducting a Christian life, especially among those who would serve as his clergy.

John Wesley dictated just about every aspect of the lives of the Methodist preachers he supervised, including what time they should get up in the morning (4:30 am) and how to spend all the various hours of the day. It was, in many ways, similar to a monastic order, except they didn't live a cloistered life and were allowed to marry.

But, unlike many other systems, Wesley's rules went beyond rules for self-discipline and how to treat other people, and how and when to pray. He also had rules about how his preachers should treat their horses. One of his rules for them was, "Be merciful

to your beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes, that your horse be rubbed, fed, and bedded.” That rule didn’t carry forward after Wesley’s passing.

I haven’t been able to find when it got eliminated, but I’m not at all surprised that even his initial rule that I just read you is very hard to find, even in today’s Google-dominated world. Caring for animals that are “useful” to us, isn’t popular, as it places limits on how we might use them. Still, I had managed in seminary to learn about his insistence that preachers care for their horses.

However, it wasn’t until about 15 years ago that I found out John Wesley had preached an entire sermon on the sacred nature of all creation titled, “The General Deliverance,” which is based on the passage from Romans that Kim read earlier. The 1991 anthology of 50 of Wesley’s sermons I had read in seminary didn’t include it. It just squeaked into a 2013 collection of 60 of Wesley’s sermons as number 58, included with 7 others—as the publisher notes—“to fill things out for contemporary interests.”

As you’ve heard me say many, many times; care for the earth is established as the unique human vocation in Genesis 2:15. Here’s the earth, Adam, serve and protect it. The recognition and treatment of the earth as sacred—along with all that lives on, under, and above it—is as ancient a mandate as there is in the Bible. And yet, only now, do Wesley’s words about it—the sermon he felt was a “contemporary interest” when he preached it in 1781—only now does it become relevant to us?

What Wesley heard in Paul’s letter to the Romans was that the dominion over the earth God had given to humans in Genesis 1:28 had been grossly abused after the Fall, so that even back in Paul’s time—in the Roman empire of the first century—all of creation was groaning for its redemption because the foot of human enterprise was standing on its neck.

Thus, Creation waits eagerly for the children of God to be revealed, at which time those revealed children of God would again exercise their dominion through service and protection, as was commanded of them in the Garden. When they do, Paul writes, “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”

In the General Deliverance sermon, Wesley takes special note of that verse—that “creation itself” is brought into the same freedom and glory reserved for the children of God. For Wesley, the entire created order is destined for redemption, right along with human beings. I would argue with a few things Wesley says in that sermon about what he sees as the differences between humans and other creatures—the “brutes” as he calls them.

But on the main point of God’s intended redemption of all of creation and not just human beings, we are in total alignment. We are also in agreement that it is the job of human beings to manifest that awareness and care. Care for creation is one of the signs that we are moving toward restoring what was lost in Eden; or, as Wesley liked to put it, “moving on to perfection,” by the power of God’s sanctifying grace.

It’s tricky to help people recognize that creation itself is sacred, especially in this world where many don’t consider most of the human population on the planet to be sacred. Throw in the fact that the world-wide economy is thoroughly supported by turning the earth and everything it produces into a commodity that can and should be available to those with the means to extract it, and it’s an uphill battle to dethrone the idols of our age.

The thousands of articles by scientists around the globe detailing the destruction already happening, the species going extinct daily; the acidification of the oceans, hard data showing that 2023 was the hottest year for the planet ever recorded, with one reporting that it was the hottest 12-month period in at least 125,000 years. It all falls into a political black hole, even as the world alternately drowns and burns. Rational debate is taken away from our tool box as we can no longer agree on facts.

But one of the reasons that authoritarian regimes go after artists, poets, and religious leaders as they seek to consolidate power is that those who can stir the heart have the ability to bypass their propaganda. There are many ways of knowing and other ways of learning the truth when facts and data are either manipulated or ignored.

Such is the role of stories and literature, of the painting or photograph that is worth a thousand words, of the poem whose simple words can re-orient our view, of the rituals and religious structures that can make space for us to actually experience God in our midst rather than merely contemplate what others have thought, of the music and film that can help us visit places our bodies have never been and stir in us what our childhood selves once knew about the world but have long since forgotten.

So, for the last few minutes, I’m going to just juxtapose some passages from Wesley’s General Deliverance sermon with some of Mary Oliver’s poetry. The latter comes from across her body of work as collected in an anthology published in 2020 titled *Devotions*. I extracted the selections from the sermon from a .pdf posted at WordsOfWesley.com, which was taken from *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson.

At the close, the choir will remind us, in joyful song, that we know God is watching over us precisely because Jesus assured us that God is also watching out for sparrows.

As for Patsy, the pot-bellied pig, she met an end that is emblematic of this whole sermon as well as of Dixie County, Florida, where Cross City is the county seat. When Casey was in middle school, there was a hurricane, and Patsy escaped her enclosure. The neighbors found her—and ate her.

Mr. Pooper met a more natural end, and it is my hope that he waits at the pearly gates with St. Peter, given special permission by God to decide the fate of those who killed and ate Patsy. Having known the sweet Mr. Pooper, I'm sure he will show them more grace than I would.

But now to John Wesley and Mary Oliver. I begin with Wesley. You should be able to tell which is which.

“Nothing is more sure, than that as "the Lord is loving to every man," so "his mercy is over all his works;" all that have sense, all that are capable of pleasure or pain, of happiness or misery.

In consequence of this, "He openeth his hand, and filleth all things living with plenteousness. He prepareth food for cattle," as well as "herbs for the children of men." He provideth for the fowls of the air, "feeding the young ravens when they cry unto him." "He sendeth the springs into the rivers, that run among the hills, to give drink to every beast of the field," and that even "the wild asses may quench their thirst."

And, suitably to this, he directs us to be tender of even the meaner creatures; to show mercy to these also. "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn:" -- A custom which is observed in the eastern countries even to this day. And this is by no means contradicted by St. Paul's question: "Doth God take care for oxen?" Without doubt he does. We cannot deny it, without flatly contradicting his word.

“If the Creator and Father of every living thing is rich in mercy towards all; if he does not overlook or despise any of the works of his own hands; if he wills even the meanest of them to be happy, according to their degree; how comes it to pass, that such a complication of evils oppresses, yea, overwhelms them? How is it that misery of all kinds overspreads the face of the earth?”

“All the while	to the light of his eye
I was teaching	as the cars went by.
in the state of Virginia	Two mornings later
I wanted to see	I found the other.
gray fox.	She was in the highway.
Finally I found him.	She was singing
He was in the highway.	her death song.
He was singing	I picked her up
his death song.	and carried her
I picked him up	into the field
and carried him	where she rippled
into a field	half of her gray
while the cars kept coming.	half of her red
He showed me	while the cars kept coming.
how he could ripple	While the cars kept coming.
how he could bleed.	Gray fox and gray fox.
Goodbye I said	Red, red, red.”

This was the supreme perfection of man; (as it is of all intelligent beings;) the continually seeing, and loving, and obeying the Father of the spirits of all flesh. From this right state and right use of all his faculties, his happiness naturally flowed. In this the essence of his happiness consisted; But it was increased by all the things that were round about him.

He saw, with unspeakable pleasure, the order, the beauty, the harmony, of all the creatures; of all animated, all inanimate nature; the serenity of the skies; the sun walking in brightness; the sweetly variegated clothing of the earth; the trees, the fruits, the flowers, And liquid lapse of murmuring streams. Nor was this pleasure interrupted by evil of any kind. It had no alloy of sorrow or pain, whether of body or mind.

3. To this creature, endued with all these excellent faculties, thus qualified for his high charge, God said, "Have thou dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Gen. 1:28.) ... So that man was God's vicegerent upon earth, the prince and governor of this lower world; and all the blessings of God flowed through him to the inferior creatures. Man was the channel of conveyance between his Creator and the whole brute creation.

Meadowlark, when you sing it's as if
you lay your yellow breast upon mine and say
hello, hello, and are we not
of one family, in our delight of life?
You sing, I listen.
Both are necessary
if the world is to continue going around
night-heavy then light-laden, though not
everyone knows this or at least
not yet,
or, perhaps, has forgotten it
in the torn fields,
in the terrible debris of progress.

II. 1. As all the blessings of God in paradise flowed through man to the inferior creatures; as man was the great channel of communication, between the Creator and the whole brute creation; so when man made himself incapable of transmitting those blessings, that communication was necessarily cut off. The intercourse between God and the inferior creatures being stopped, those blessings could no longer flow in upon them. And then it was that "the creature," every creature, "was subjected to vanity," to sorrow, to pain of every kind, to all manner of evils:

From This River, When I Was a Child, I Used to Drink

But when I came back I found
that the body of the river was dying.
"Did it speak?"

Yes, it sang out the old songs, but faintly.
"What will you do?"

I will grieve of course, but that's nothing.
"What, precisely, will you grieve for?"

For the river. For myself, my lost
joyfulness. For the children who will not
know what a river can be—a friend, a companion, a hint of heaven.
"Isn't this somewhat overplayed?"

I said: it can be a friend. A companion. A hint of heaven.

6. During this season of vanity, not only the feebler creatures are continually destroyed by the stronger; not only the strong are frequently destroyed by those that are of equal strength; but both the one and the other are exposed to the violence and cruelty of him that is now their common enemy, -- man.

And if his swiftness or strength is not equal to theirs, yet his art more than supplies that defect. By this he eludes all their force, how great soever it be; by this he defeats all their swiftness; and, notwithstanding their various shifts and contrivances, discovers all their retreats. He pursues them over the widest plains, and through the thickest forests. He overtakes them in the fields of air, he finds them out in the depths of the sea.

Nor are the mild and friendly creatures who still own his sway, and are duteous to his commands, secured thereby from more than brutal violence; from outrage and abuse of various kinds.

Is the generous horse, that serves his master's necessity or pleasure with unwearied diligence, -- is the faithful dog, that waits the motion of his hand, or his eye, exempt from this? What returns for their long and faithful service do many of these poor creatures find? And what a dreadful difference is there, between what they suffer from their fellow-brutes, and what they suffer from the tyrant man!

The lion, the tiger, or the shark, gives them pain from mere necessity, in order to prolong their own life; and puts them out of their pain at once: But the human shark, without any such necessity, torments them of his free choice; and perhaps continues their lingering pain till, after months or years, death signs their release.

In every heart there is a coward and a procrastinator.
In every heart there is a god of flowers, just waiting
to come out of its cloud and lift its wings.
The kookaburras, kingfishers, pressed against the edge of
their cage, they asked me to open the door.
Years later I wake in the night and remember how I said to them,
no, and walked away.
They had the brown eyes of soft-hearted dogs.
They didn't want to do anything so extraordinary, only to fly
home to their river.
By now I suppose the great darkness has covered them.
As for myself, I am not yet a god of even the palest flowers.
Nothing else has changed either.
Someone tosses their white bones to the dung-heap.
The sun shines on the latch of their cage.
I lie in the dark, my heart pounding.

III. 1. But will "the creature," will even the brute creation, always remain in this deplorable condition? God forbid that we should affirm this; yea, or even entertain such a thought! While "the whole creation groaneth together," (whether men attend or not,) their groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of Him that made them.

While his creatures "travail together in pain," he knoweth all their pain, and is bringing them nearer and nearer to the birth, which shall be accomplished in its season. He seeth "the earnest expectation" wherewith the whole animated creation "waiteth for" that final "manifestation of the sons of God;" in which "they themselves also shall be delivered" (not by annihilation; annihilation is not deliverance) "from the" present "bondage of corruption, into" a measure of "the glorious liberty of the children of God."

2. Nothing can be more express: Away with vulgar prejudices, and let the plain word of God take place. They "shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into glorious liberty," -- even a measure, according as they are capable, -- of "the liberty of the children of God."

As a recompence for what they once suffered, while under the "bondage of corruption," when God has "renewed the face of the earth," and their corruptible body has put on incorruption, they shall enjoy happiness suited to their state, without alloy, without interruption, and without end.

1. I don't know who God is exactly.
But I'll tell you this.
I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.
Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water.
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying.
Said the river I am part of holiness.
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.
Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.
You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.
You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.
And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through all the traffic, the ambition.
2. If God exists he isn't just butter and good luck.
He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.
Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going.

Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God) would sing to you if it could sing,
if you would pause to hear it.
And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn't sing?

If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.
He's the forest, He's the desert.
He's the ice caps, that are dying.
He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert Motherwell.
He's the many desperate hands, cleaning and preparing their weapons.
He's every one of us, potentially.
The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet.
And if this is true, isn't it something very important?

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and each of you too, or at least
of his intention and his hope.
Which is a delight beyond measure.
I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea.
I only know that the river kept singing.
It wasn't a persuasion, it was all the river's own constant joy
which was better by far than a lecture, which was comfortable, exciting, unforgettable.

3. Of course for each of us, there is the daily life.
Let us live it, gesture by gesture.
When we cut the ripe melon, should we not give it thanks?
And should we not thank the knife also?
We do not live in a simple world.
4. There was someone I loved who grew old and ill
One by one I watched the fires go out.
There was nothing I could do
except to remember
that we receive
then we give back.
5. My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest, she is given back.
But the river Clarion still flows from wherever it comes from
to where it has been told to go.
I pray for the desperate earth.
I pray for the desperate world.
I do the little each person can do, it isn't much.
Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.
6. Along its shores were, may I say, very intense cardinal flowers.
And trees, and birds that have wings to uphold them, for heaven's sakes—
the lucky ones: they have such deep natures,
they are so happily obedient.
While I sit here in a house filled with books,
ideas, doubts, hesitations.
7. And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river
keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its
long journey, its pale, infallible voice
singing.

"At the River Clarion" by Mary Oliver, from [Evidence: Poems](#), Beacon Press.

6. May I be permitted to mention here a conjecture concerning the brute creation? What, if it should then please the all-wise, the all-gracious Creator to raise them higher in the scale of beings? What, if it should please him, when he makes us "equal to angels," to make them what we are now, -- creatures capable of God; capable of knowing and loving and enjoying the Author of their being?

7. If it be objected to all this, (as very probably it will,) ... Consider this; consider how little we know of even the present designs of God; and then you will not wonder that we know still less of what he designs to do in the new heavens and the new earth.

Why do people keep asking to see
God's identity papers
when the darkness opening into morning
is more than enough?
Certainly any god might turn away in disgust.
Think of Sheba approaching
the kingdom of Solomon.
Do you think she had to ask,
"Is this the place?"

9. May it not answer another end; namely, furnish us with a full answer to a plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that never had sinned to be so severely punished? They could not sin, for they were not moral agents. Yet how severely do they suffer! -- yea, many of them, beasts of burden in particular, almost the whole time of their abode on earth; So that they can have no retribution here below.

But the objection vanishes away, if we consider that something better remains after death for these poor creatures also; that these, likewise, shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.

10. One more excellent end may undoubtedly be answered by the preceding considerations. They may encourage us to imitate Him whose mercy is over all his works. They may soften our hearts towards the meaner creatures, knowing that the Lord careth for them. It may enlarge our hearts towards those poor creatures, to reflect that, as vile as they appear in our eyes, not one of them is forgotten in the sight of our Father which is in heaven.

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Amen.

John Wesley. Sermon 60 "The General Deliverance" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Apr 15,2024)

Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver, Mary Oliver; Penguin Books: 2020