Worshippers in Relationship with Nature:

Worshipping in Relationship with Nature: A Reflection by David Rhoads

Worship is the central recurring event in the life of a Christian community. It is in the gathered community at worship that we celebrate our life together and affirm our identity as children of God and followers of Jesus. Worship is the place where we can be transformed anew each week as we seek to return from the struggles and vicissitudes of life in the world to restore our spiritual and moral rooted-ness in the life of God. Worship is also a central place where we articulate our fundamental beliefs and values. Therefore our love of God’s creation and our commitment to care for it should play an integral role in our worship life.

Worship as restoration of relationships.

One way to look at worship is to say that it is about reinstating our proper place in relation to God, ourselves, and other people. It is like being lost in the woods and then stopping to orientate ourselves to the directions by means of a compass and our nearness to the edge of the forest–and then finding our way home. It is like being lost at sea and then stopping to locate ourselves from the stars in the sky so that we know where we really are–and then returning to solid ground. It is like using a global positioning locator to know just where we are in relation to everything else in the solar system–and then being moved into the right position. Worship is a matter of getting our bearings and being restored to our rightful place in the universe. In this process, it is important to emphasize that it is not we ourselves who get our bearings. Rather, we put ourselves into a position to allow God to give us our bearings, to restore us to our rightful relationships.
So, through the rituals of worship, we find ourselves restored to right relationships. Through worship we are reoriented to wholeness and our true purpose in life by coming back into proper relationship with God, ourselves and others. For example, by praise to God, we restore God to God’s rightful place in our lives as the one who created and sustains us. By thanksgiving we recognize our human dependence on God for life and health. By confession and forgiveness, we seek to overcome our self-alienation and the brokenness of our relationships. By hearing the word of grace and challenge, we rediscover a proper sense of direction and our purpose in life. Through the offering, we give ourselves and our resources to this renewed vocation. Through prayer, we express a longing for all people who are lost or broken to be restored to a place of wholeness in relationship. By communing together, we return from alienation to a harmonious connection with others of the human community. With a blessing and a benediction, we go out with a renewed sense of who we are, where we are, and where we are going. We have orientated ourselves. We have used our spiritual compass to re-locate ourselves. We have found our bearings, and we have reaffirmed who we truly are and whose we truly are—and, in so doing, we have found our way home.

Unfortunately, our restoration to place often leaves out an important and, indeed, crucial relationship. We reorient to God, self, and others, but often without restoring our relationship to nature. Yet nature is the web of life out of which we have come and where we will go. Nature is the inextricable matrix in which we live and move and have our being. We are a part of nature. Along with all other living beings and non-living things, we are nature. And if we are out of sorts with the rest of nature, if we are displaced from harmony with the rest of creation of which we are such an integral part, if we are sinning against the natural world from which we ourselves have emerged, then we cannot fully find our bearings or our place. If God created the world as a place in relation to which human life is inextricably woven, then we need to make all of the natural world an integral part of our worshipping experience. If worship is restoring ourselves to our proper place in the world—to recall who we are, where we have come from, the things upon which we depend, and that for which we are responsible—then worship must be a celebration of all life and a reorienting of ourselves to our proper place within it. Nature can and should be such an integral dimension of worship that we reflect the triad: Love God, Love your neighbor as yourself, and care for creation.

The rituals of worship can integrate the place of all God’s creation with every part of worship and thus help to restore us fully to our place of health and wholeness.
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· In worship we can celebrate the wonder of creation and marvel at God's handiwork. We can praise the God who created the bluejay and the raccoon, the poplar and the gardenias, the mountain spring water and the rich soil of the field.

· We can give thanks for the air we breathe and for the water we drink and for the provision of food—and for the beauty and majesty of it all.

· We can confess the greed and indifference by which we humans have despoiled the earth.

· We can seek pardon for our violation of the hills through mining or our degradation of the air and water through pollution or our threat to the ozone layer and to the species whose survival is uncertain because of our human actions or for the human contributions to the global warming that may change the cycles of nature upon which we have come to depend. Forgiveness can free us to act out of compassion rather than guilt.

· Through the word proclaimed, we can announce the love of God for creation, the grace that God offers, and the mandates God gives as means to address the eco-justice problems of our age. We can see the human harm we do when we exploit the earth, we can also be reminded of the common graces of nature, and we can be summoned to the challenge to care for the earth.

· In the offering, we can offer ourselves to the care and redemption of all that God has made—as agents of God to be guardians of nature, stewards of its resources, lovers of life, earthkeepers, and caretakers of the land.

· We can pray for the capacity for all God's creatures to thrive together on earth. We can intercede for endangered species, threatened eco-systems, and changing global conditions. And we can pray for the courage and wisdom to act.

· We can go out from worship with a blessing to till and tend this garden earth on which we live and move and have our being.
Hence, in order for us to be truly reoriented by our worship, we can incorporate love for, celebration of, concern for, prayer for, and a commitment to care for all creation into each dimension of each worship service. If worship is a transformation restoring us to wholeness by restoring our proper relationships in life, then our relationship with the rest of nature needs to be an integral part of that power of worship to change us. Just as we could not imagine worship without praising God or praying for others in need, so too we should not be able to imagine worship without expressions of our love for and our commitment to care for God’s creation.

Worship practices that incorporate care for creation.

Here are some examples of ways in which care for creation can be very naturally incorporated into parts or all of regular worship services.

• *Hymns*: include hymns that express praise for God the creator and our relationship to the rest of nature. There are many traditional hymns as well as new hymns and hymnals that deal with the love of nature.

• *Litanies of confession*: incorporate into your litanies some expressions of confession concerning our pollution of water, our defiling of the air, our arrogant use of creation without respect and limitations, among many others.
• *Litanies of concern*: these can always include expressions of our longing for creation to thrive, as surely as we pray for peace among humans.

• *Psalms of praise*: there are many Psalms in the Bible that celebrate creation.

• *Scripture and preaching*: preachers can become aware in new ways of the dimensions of the scriptural writings that deal with the human relationship and responsibility for the rest of creation.

• *Prayers of thanksgiving*: for so many things in nature upon which humans depend and about which we delight for their own sake. We dare not take these for granted.

• *Prayers of petition*: can include prayers on behalf of endangered species, restoration of habitats, a cessation of practices that harm the earth, as well as
healing and justice for those who have been affected by earth’s degradation.

Include petitions that are related to the lectionary lessons.

- **Offering**: to give ourselves to the care and redemption of all that God has made, to offer our resources and actions that care for the earth.

- **Blessings**: for all of life to thrive in the favor of God.

In addition to regular services, there are many special occasions in which the entire service may be devoted to the celebration of and care for creation, such as:

- Saint Francis Day
- Thanksgiving
- Rogation Day
- Earth Day

[See the Holy Days Calendar at the Web of Creation for other suggestions]

Also, each season of the year lends itself to the thematic development of our relationship with
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all creation:

The advent season—as all creation groans together as we await redemption

and restoration of all of life. Advent is a time to repent in preparation

for a new age.

Epiphany season—to celebrate the manifestation and glory of God in the

natural order of life.

Lenten season—as we grieve the losses to our environment and reflect on the

sacrifices we can make to stop our sins against creation.

Easter season—as we celebrate the resurrection of human life and envision

the restoration/ regeneration of all of life.

Pentecost season—to reflect on the wisdom we need and the actions we can

take to live a life in which all human and non-human creation can
In all of these seasons, there is the opportunity to include all of God's creation in our observances and celebrations of the seasons. And the seasonal decorations, banners, and sayings can keep this message before the congregation throughout the year.

In addition to Sunday services, there may also be opportunities to develop brief services for special occasions. For example, a congregation may decide to plant a tree and dedicate it to a member of the community who has died—then perhaps place a memorial plaque by the tree. Or you may want to have a service that blesses the land on which your buildings stand or a new community garden or the placing of plants and trees in the sanctuary or the church building. Some congregations have a service of the burning of Christmas trees on Epiphany. Instead, why not have a service of recycling and rebirth as the trees are prepared for composting?

Preaching.

There are now some resources available that give sermon reflections and notes related to the lessons of the Common Lectionary. Whether following a lectionary or doing thematic preaching, here are some subjects that could be included in preaching.

Human responsibility to care for the earth.

Our proper human role/place in relation to the rest of creation.

Our degradation of creation
Reasons why we fail in our responsibility

Reasons why we ought to care and act on our convictions

The inter-relationship between human justice and environmental problems

The scriptural connection between human sin and the languishing of earth.

Celebration of God as creator

Celebration of all of life for its own sake

The extent of human dependency on life around us. Gratitude for life.

Exploration of Christian symbols that are rooted in nature

Connecting the sacraments to the realm of nature

New ways of thinking about God that foster our change of attitude and action

Proclamation of God’s enduring grace in and through creation
The extension of the efficacy of Christ’s death and resurrection to all life

Sacraments:

The sacraments are occasions to reflect on the human relationship with the rest of creation. Here are some reflections on the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

We often focus on the symbolic aspect of the elements used in sacraments: water, bread, and wine. But, in the context of our concern for the environment, we can focus on the elements themselves. As a Eucharist or "thanksgiving," Holy Communion can be an opportunity to express gratitude for all the natural order that sustains life at both a material and a spiritual level, leading us to delight anew in the creation. To see the natural elements of the sacraments—water, grain, and grapes—as vehicles of grace is to realize that the finite can be a bearer of the infinite to us. This in itself elevates the goodness of nature as worthy and capable of being the means by which we establish a relationship with God and God establishes a relationship with us.

For example, traditionally baptism involves water for cleansing and for judgment. But what about exploring the richness of the symbol of water in new ways in light of our contemporary knowledge and experience of water. We now know that water is the primordial context out of which life emerged and evolved to its present state. Why not connect this with the new creation at baptism? If baptism symbolizes a new beginning to life, then we can reflect on the new beginning to humanity that comes by immersing ourselves in water—so that we can, in a sense, re-emerge from water as a renewed humanity or as renewed life in all its manifestations. Or could we not emphasize how vital water is to life—how our bodies are 90% water and we cannot live long without it? In this way, the water of life in baptism reinforces our gratitude for the water upon which we depend for life and health. Or baptism may remind us of how tragic it is to consider being baptized by water that is polluted rather than the pure sparkling water that God created. Such a connection could lead us to see anew our vocation as baptized people to preserve clean water on the earth. Or by baptism in water, we may acknowledge how much of the whole earth is comprised of water. In this way, the very fact that we are declared a child of God by immersion into nature itself can serve to get us in touch with our embeddedness in nature as human beings. In all these ways we may reconnect the water of baptism to the water
around us in nature.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is another opportunity to realize how integral is our embeddedness in nature. In the Eucharist, we are using natural products of earth as a vehicle for God’s presence: wine from grapes and bread from grain. But it is more than that. Grapes grow from the vine that brings it forth, the ingredients of the soil, the water that nourishes the soil, the beetles that aerate the soil, the sun that shines on the plants, the air that surrounds the plant—and the composition and the combination of these elements is unique to the particular area or region where the grapes are being raised. Add to these sources of the grapes the wood from the trees used to make the barrels in which the wine was stored and the ingredients employed as aging agents. We can reflect in a similar way on the bread used for communion. And some congregations use bread made of multiple grains originating from several continents. In these ways, the elements of the Eucharist get us in touch with all of nature.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is given to humans. Yet if communion is symbolically the offer of God’s grace given freely to restore communion between people, God, one another, and all of nature, then imagine this scene. The walls of the church are open to the outside, open to the trees and the grass and the wind, and so animals wander in and mingle with the people. There is a communion rail at which people are kneeling to receive the bread and wine. In between the people kneeling are animals that have wandered in—a raccoon has its paws up in the rail, a snake strains its mouth up over the rail to receive the bread, a bird is perched eating crumbs left on the communion rail, a cat leaps up and walks across the altar. The vision makes us aware that all of nature strains forward to receive the grace of God as a condition for our mutual thriving and well-being. All of life longs for the unconditional love and care necessary for all living things to fulfill their role in the web of creation.

In addition, the Eucharist is connected to all of life in another way. It is a reminder of the death of Jesus, a recollection that all of life is a cycle of living and dying and resurrection. This is not to reduce the particularity of Christ’s death or the efficacy of it for salvation to the processes of nature. Rather, it is simply to recognize that the death of Jesus is an analog to the natural order in that death gives birth to life. The deaths of trees and other plants and the death of animals over the life span of the planet have made the earth into a great store of energy and one great compost heap that is the source of our life today.

Finally, it is important to observe that the elements of the sacraments are "common" elements of life—elements of food upon which we depend for life—assuring us that if God can be present in and through such common elements as bread and wine, then surely God is present to us everywhere in life. What difference does it make to our view of the daily food we eat and the
daily drinks we drink knowing that bread and wine are sacramental? What difference does it make to our experience of water and soil and air, knowing that water is sacramental. The Eucharist is meant not only to lead us to experience the particularity of its symbolic meaning in the communion meal. It also leads us to think differently about all common elements of life—in such a way that our common experiences of them also become sacramental. That is, all elements of nature may convey for us the grace of God, that dearest freshness that lies deep down all things.

**Worshipping "with" nature:**

We suggested above that other animals might be part of a worship service. This is not so far fetched when we recall that the Psalms call for the hills to clap their hands and the trees to shout praises, thus calling for all creation to "Praise the Lord." Hence, we can think about nature as a partner in worship. Nature itself is part of our worshipping community. It is important then that we are in nature or with nature in our worship. Here are some ideas to express this theological and natural truth:

1. **Fill the church with greenery—trees, plants, and flowers.** Not only are people nourished by their presence, but a careful choice of plants can purify the air naturally and make the church a healthier place to be. Use collected rainwater to water the plants. Invite people to bring flowers and plants to decorate the church for each worship. Put ivy on the inside walls.

2. **Overcome the separation between inside the church and outside.** Place plants inside windows that are next to similar plants outside. One church in Africa has a large tree growing up in the middle of the sanctuary. Make the grounds of the church beautiful, with windows from the sanctuary looking out over the grounds. Open the church up with skylights or clear glass to the natural light from the outside.

3. **Bring other life into the church.** Have a blessing of the animals in which people bring pets and other creatures to be blessed. Why not place an aquarium inside the sanctuary? Consider other ways to have life in the sanctuary.
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(4) Worship outside, not only on church grounds but also in places of natural beauty—by a stream, next to a lake, in a park or wooded area, by a farmer’s field, on a hillside.

(5) Have a “greening of the cross” service.

(6) Give people seeds or even a tree to plant. A church in Africa seeking to reforest their denuded region gives out trees after each Eucharist, and members go out from the church and together plant the trees.

(7) Consider decorating the sanctuary with artwork that depicts the connection with nature—banners, stained glass windows, painting, or murals.

In all these ways you can create an ethos to the congregation that will enable people to experience nature in the midst of worship itself and thereby to worship with nature.

Personal Devotions.

It is important to encourage Christians to incorporate their relationship with nature not only into corporate worship but also into their private devotional worship. There are many resources available—devotional books, collections of prayers, poetry, selected scripture passages, exercises and experiences, among others—that can give our community members a daily the experience of closeness to nature, the nourishments of its common graces, and the sense of responsibility for it that are so important in the world today.
Conclusion:

By immersion and by osmosis, the weekly connection with nature through words and symbols and ritual actions and the presence of nature itself will work a salutary effect on the worshipping community. By weekly, indeed daily, immersion, a transformation can occur that leads people to see our integral connection with all God's creation and that enables people to come to a place of new and renewed gratitude for nature and a sense of responsibility to care for creation as part of our vocation as humans and as God's people.