



"All hail
the power
of

GEORGE L. MURPHY

Jesus' name"

Scientific Themes in Worship and Preaching

GEORGE L. MURPHY

"Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord" says the ninety-sixth Psalm. This is just one of the places where scripture speaks about the whole world praising God. Psalm 148 calls sun and moon, hills and beasts to worship, and in Revelation 5 "every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth" lauds the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. Stars and trees echo God's glory, but they do not worship consciously. Our own species, however, is a part of creation that can praise God with mind and speech. Humanity is the universe become conscious and able to express the praises of the universe. We are called to lead the cosmic choir in acclaiming its creator, savior, and sanctifier.

If we take that call seriously, our worship will show awareness of our place in the universe—the real universe which science seeks to understand and not some archaic model of the world. Preaching, liturgical language, hymns, and church furnishings can express the worship of Christians in a scientific and technological age, yet maintain continuity with the traditions of the church. In this way people are encouraged to respond to God's grace faithfully in a rapidly changing and sometimes confusing world.

Preaching, the proclamation of God's word on the basis of scripture, is a central feature of Christian worship. A number of biblical texts are relevant to issues raised by science and technology, thus enabling the preacher to address these issues from scriptural standpoints. (*Cosmic Witness* by George L. Murphy, LaVonne Althouse, and Russell Willis is a commentary which may be helpful for this purpose.) Some applications are fairly obvious. Texts from the first chapters of Genesis call for attention to the big bang or biological evolution, and provide opportunities to help people understand these sometimes controversial matters theologically. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 speaks to the problem of overconfidence in technology. Almost any one of the miracle accounts of the gospels gives a chance to reflect on how God acts in the world, both through natural phenomena that are understood scientifically and in extraordinary events that we are not able to explain in scientific terms.

A sermon should not be simply a lecture on science or technology. It can be God's word to people who wonder about their place in a huge and ancient universe, who are often tempted to place their trust in their own remarkable advances in technology, or who may be doubtful whether God acts in a world described by scientific laws. Preaching can help worshippers to appreciate the grandeur of God's creative and redemptive work without forgetting God's care for the individual. For example,

Colossians 1:15-20 relates God's cosmic purpose to the human Christ. It can also enable Christians who work in science, technology, or medicine to see their daily work as service in God's world.

The sacraments are also essential aspects of worship. Both Baptism and the Eucharist have connections with science and faith. It is significant, for example, that the elements used in the Lord's Supper are not just grain and grapes, which God provides through natural processes, but those fruits of the earth processed by human technology.

However, reference to that fact or to the physical properties of water in the liturgical language itself should be incidental at most because these are not the foci of the sacraments. Alternatively, discussion of the scientific and technological aspects of the sacraments in educational settings can prepare worshippers to appreciate those dimensions of worship when they are encountered.

Each Christian should understand baptism as a call to discipleship and see his or her vocation as an opportunity to serve God and neighbor. This is especially important for scientists, whose work has sometimes been viewed with suspicion by the church. A service of affirmation of baptism, with special emphasis on vocation, could be helpful in remembering science, technology, and medicine as Christian vocations.

Other special services have natural connections with our themes. In services of healing (e.g., pages 613-629 of *The United Methodist Book of Worship*) we ask for God's healing with the knowledge that in the great majority of cases it will come through medical science and its practitioners. The ancient practice of anointing the sick with oil (James 5:14-15) should not be seen as an alternative to medical care. Instead, the oil should be understood as itself a simple medicine (e.g., Luke 10:34) that symbolizes all the medicines and other technologies through which God may work to restore health. This may also encourage nurses and doctors to see themselves as instruments of divine healing.

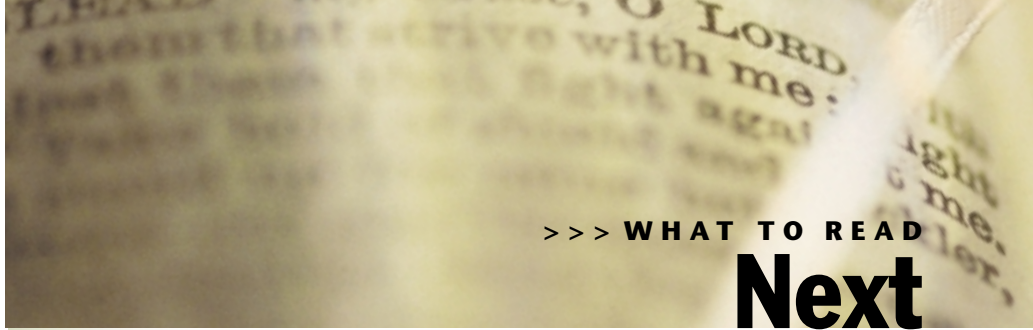
Churches can also emphasize environmental responsibility in worship settings. The practice of blessing the fields and praying for harvest in Rogationtide, at the end of the Easter season, goes back over a thousand years. This traditional service has been adapted to modern ecological concerns in Earth Sunday, Stewardship of Creation Sunday, and related observances.

Congregational singing has always been an important part of worship in Protestant traditions, and many hymns refer to different aspects of creation. Some, however, make use of what we now know to be outdated concepts of the world. By contrast, "God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens," #150 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, refers to modern science and technology as gifts of the Creator and points out both their promise and their challenge. Musicians, poets, and scientists might collaborate to produce more good hymns of this type.

All that we do is to be worship in the broadest sense, a response to God's manifold gifts. Attention to scientific and technological themes can help Christians see what is done in church as a centering of that wider honor which we are to pay to God. □



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>>> WHAT TO READ Next

- **George L. Murphy, Lavonne Althouse, and Russell Willis**
Cosmic Witness

(CSS, 1996). A lectionary commentary in which the authors provide "a starting point for developing sermons which address the intersection of Christian Faith and contemporary science and technology."

- **George L. Murphy,** "The Influence of Science on Christian Worship" *Seminary Ridge Review*

(Published by the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Winter 1999), pp. 63-73.

Two resources which are concerned especially with the ecological dimensions of worship are:

- **H. Paul Santmire**

"How does the liturgy relate to the cosmos and care for the earth?" in Gordon Lathrop (ed.), *What are the Ethical Implications of Worship?*

(Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 14-24.

- **Dianne Bergant**

The Earth Is the Lord's: The Bible, Ecology, and Worship (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN, 1998).

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