

COMING HOME

A few years ago, at seminary, I took a course on liturgy in an age of widespread ecological collapse, which is to say a course on planning and designing meaningful worship services for the times that we are now living in. As a matter of course, my peers and I were tasked with developing worship services for the Union Theological Seminary Chapel, which daily hosted hour-long worship services at noon. These services were often quite extraordinary—highly experimental services. We were co-creating together in creative and generative ways that made ample use of imagination and playfulness. Some have even characterized these services as “avant garde.” Despite this reputation, our services were usually not a matter of any importance beyond the walls of the seminary chapel. But one of these more extraordinary services caused quite a stir; it got picked up in the press and snowballed into national story and even a Twitter trend.

Our professor, Dr. Claudio Carvalhaes, who grew up in a Pentecostal church in Brazil, is as loving and thoughtful and generous a person as you could ever hope to know. He is also full of whimsy and an irrepressible flair for the dramatic, as anyone who has seen a now popular photo of him preaching at a major conference dressed in a lobster costume. Professor Carvalhaes wanted us to create a confessional service that centered on the relationship between humans and the natural world. The result was a service in which participants in the service, on a voluntary basis, confessed their contribution to ecological harms to an arrangement of plants, which were the botanical companions of students in the class and of Professor Carvalhaes himself. The plants were displayed in a circle in the center of the chapel and when the time came for confession, the music quieted, the rustling stirred to a still, and silence permeated the space—all of us waiting for what would be the first words of confession. Finally, it came: “I confess I have not thought much about how trees and others are affected by my actions.” Eventually, one-by-one, students spoke up, variously confessing their sins in a similar vein.

From my perspective, while imperfect, it was a deeply thoughtful and moving service, one that lingered with me all that afternoon. It wasn't long after that I finally came up for air after a period of intense study and saw some missed text messages with links to articles and all kinds of internet responses to the service. The Seminary's Twitter account shared an image of the service with a brief description, and more conservative theological voices seized on it as proof that we were hopeless "pagans" and "pantheists." For the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, folks were alleging that Union was teaching its students to worship plants. From conservative publications like Washington Examiner and First Things to more moderate sources like the [Washington Post](#) and [Religion News Services](#), it seemed everyone had something to contribute to the discussion—mostly, though, it was just snark and facile mischaracterizations. It became something of a PR headache for the Seminary, which had to put up a special page on its website to respond to the issue. We were floored by how much attention and especially how much controversy this episode engendered. As one person observed, if we had designed a service that consisted of folks confessing their sins to one another, no one would have batted an eye. Why is this, I wondered? Why did this seem to hit such a nerve? And why, despite agreeing fully with the spirit of the service and recognizing its beauty and power, did I feel silly confessing my ecological sins to a plant?

As I've reflected on this over the intervening years and especially in this special season of Lent, in which we seek to remove to that which separates us from the divine source of love that permeates and sustains our common life, I've come to think that the reason for this reaction has to do with a word that most of us know, I think, but maybe don't give much thought to. It's a word that recently appeared for the very first time in the most recent installment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report, released just two weeks ago. The word is colonialism, and as this latest report makes clear, it lies at the root of not just of Earth's rapidly collapsing ecosystems and mass extinctions; it's at the heart also of the uneven and unjust ways the resulting impacts are being felt throughout the world. According to this latest report, at

least 3.3 billion people, more than 40% of Earth's population, live in regions that are "highly vulnerable to climate change," and this despite the fact that these people have contributed the least to this problem.

Now there are whole fields of study devoted to the exploration of what "colonialism" is and how it is operative in the world through the ways we think and relate to each other and our natural environments. Most if not all of us are, I think, familiar with the definition of colonialism as a practice of taking land and territory and dispossessing folks in the process. But really it goes much deeper. Colonialism is also a framework or worldview that carries a certain set of assumptions and values that leads to this practice. In order to carry out something so brazenly amoral and violent, one often needs a way of seeing that practice as justified, especially within a society that sees itself as a moral good. Well this involves thinking of oneself as exceptional, separated from others who are not like us, therefore, unworthy of our moral consideration. One of the implications for this way of seeing, which Indigenous folks have pointed out for centuries, is that we see ourselves as separate from the land—from the rivers and streams and oceans; from the valleys, meadows, hills, and mountains; from the forests and plains and even the stones. We don't relate to them as fellow inhabitants, and this, more than anything else, according to Indigenous voices, accounts for the mess in which we find ourselves.

The reality, which scientific endeavors now increasingly confirm, is that we are not the only creatures who think and reason; who feel and suffer; who imagine and dream; who play and love. The world is, as the legendary Catholic theologian Thomas Berry memorably put it, "a Communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." I know it may to some of us feel for all the world like this is some new age nonsense, and I appreciate the struggle to work through that feeling. Because it is our reality, whether we see it or not. And the truth is, there's actually nothing new about this way of seeing. On the contrary it is a timeless way of seeing. Relatively speaking, what's newfangled is a way of seeing and being in the world that is predicated on abstraction. A colonial worldview is based on metaphysical principles. An Indigenous way of

seeing is based on actual physical relationships. These are commonly referred to in scientific literature as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). (It goes without saying, by the way, that Indigenous cultures and voices are not a monolith; as in all communities, there is so much diversity among Indigenous perspectives. By Indigenous, I refer simply to a way of seeing that is rooted firmly in place and continuously informed by strong relationships with the land, waters, creatures, and other nonhuman persons..)

I know several of us are reading *Church of the Wild* right now as part of our Lenten practice. In the book, author Victoria Loorz points out that the Greek word *logos*, from which we derive our name for Christ as “the Word” of God, was until the 4th century translated into Latin “as *sermo*, which means not ‘word’ but conversation.” This has vast implications for how we think about God’s creative and redemptive acts through Christ. Think about this in relation to how we understand foundational verses John 1:1. As Loorz sums it up: “In the beginning, the Conversation created all things, and through conversation, made all things new. Entering into authentic conversation with others of all species, including our own, we participate in the story of Christ, our collective unfolding.” This isn’t really all that hard to see, if we look closely at Scripture itself. A week after the worship service in which we confessed to plants, Professor Carvalhaes published a [response](#) to the controversy reminding folks of numerous verses smack in the middle of our Bibles that endow everything from mountains to fire to snow to cattle with personal agency. It’s right there, in the textual heart of our tradition! Our Earth and, more specifically, our particular place within Earth, is teeming with subjectivity, with personality, and, yes, with conversation. It is our home, yes, but it is especially home when we see it in this way.

This is vitally important to understand, because the myriad ecological crises we face, including the climate crisis, are at root are not primarily scientific or political or technological challenges. These crises are first and foremost relational, and anything short of a relational response will not help us. Nothing we can imagine doing will have a lasting curative impact if we cannot see ecological communities as alive and speaking. In this way of seeing, we are found—

like the lost sheep who wandered away from the flock, like the prodigal children God is calling home. This way of seeing and being in the world is the path home. It is not easy, I know. It is not easy at all to summon the courage or willingness to see our perspectives and behaviors as harmful. I imagine for many of us it must seem like there's no possibility of change now. But like the prodigal son in our text, we're faced with a choice; stay committed to our choice to remain apart, even as we languish, or come to our right mind, turn around and make our way home.

Now if you've heard condemnation or scorn in any of what I've shared, let's just take a moment to breathe that out. It has no place here. This is not about judgment. Lent is not about judgment. It is in fact about the unspeakable joy and incomprehensible equanimity we experience in the act of true repentance—of turning away from that narrow view of who and what matters and turning toward the greater community to which we belong. When we allow ourselves to see Creation—truly see Creation, becoming part of the great conversation—we see the fullness of our relations. Let us go there, together. Creation awaits. Home awaits.