

Valerie Elverton Dixon

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Joy to the World

One of the most inspirational and beloved songs of the Christmas season is “Joy to the World.” It sings a celebration of the Lord’s coming. Its description and imperative is earth receives her king, that every heart prepare room, and “heaven and nature sing.” God is Love, and for Christian believers Jesus is the human incarnation of this Love. A Jewish rabbi and a prophet of Islam, Jesus taught and lived radical love, giving us an example to follow.

The blessing of Christmas is that the anointing of radical love, Christ consciousness, the gift that is given from Divine transcendence is available to every human heart that will prepare room and welcome it. The promise of Christmas is the light of love burns bright during long dark nights, and when it becomes incandescent hope and the guiding light of our lives, it can bring peace on earth.

“Joy to the World” also reminds us that the gift of love is the possibility of grace and good will to help individuals and nations to live together in peace, and it is a love that is not only for humanity but this love is a love that ought to extend to nature and to all of creation. “Joy to the World” includes the natural world. It is an ecological love. In this respect, Christmas is truly evergreen.

Most scientists agree that the world is getting warmer, and this climate change is caused by human activity. Climate change explains the increased frequency of catastrophic weather events around the globe. Flood, fire, blizzards, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes cause human death, devastation and disruption of national and international economies.

The good news is that the human family comes together to give charitable help when the natural world displays its rage, but the deeper question is: what justice does nature require?

Justice is different from charity. The Christmas season is a time for charitable giving. This is a righteous thing. This charity derives from an agape love, an ethics of caring that knows that sharing is the right and moral thing for each of us to do. It is an example of the benefits of commensal logic; giving does not diminish us, rather generosity is its own blessing.

Yet, justice asks the more difficult question. It asks the structural question: why are there so many people who need charity? Is a political economy just that rewards so few people so generously while most people struggle, living from pay-check to pay-check-- if they are fortunate enough to have a job? Regarding the natural world the question becomes: how can human beings change the habits and patterns of living so that humanity lives in just relationship with and within the natural world?

When we think about the relationship between human happiness and the preservation of the natural world, it is important to remember that humans are the divine animals and we are part of nature. We are nature and nature is us. Human health and well-being depend upon the quality of the air we breathe, the availability of clean water, the safety of the food we eat, the ways that we find to

warm ourselves in winter and cool ourselves in summer, how we manage to transport ourselves from here to there. Eating is a justice issue. This means that the very diets we choose to eat day by blessed day require us to consider justice for other human populations ; justice due to the plants and animals we consume; and justice due to the species that we eat and those we do not.

In these difficult economic times, people who make money from the extraction of fossil fuels want to use their political proxies to argue a false choice between jobs and the ecology. Billions of dollars in profits are at stake. It is especially true of the discourse around whether or not climate change is caused by human activity and what the nations of the world ought to do about it. Conflict between nations happens when the developing countries want different rules, more lenient rules, for carbon emissions than developed countries. I say that all countries, rich or poor, developed or not, ought to abide by a single standard that will work to reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere. The health of the planet is at risk, and the poorest people on the planet are now and will pay the highest price for ecological injustice, no matter the protestations of the elites in the various countries.

We see this logic of jobs vs. the environment playing itself out in the discourse around whether or not the Obama administration ought to authorize the building of the Keystone XL pipeline. This project will bring oil from Canada south to refineries in the Gulf of Mexico. I realize that jobs are important, especially in these hard economic times, but the cost to the natural world is too high. Farmers in the mid-west have joined with environmental activists to oppose its construction.

Republican presidential candidates make a mistake if they characterize opposition to the pipeline as limited to “extremist San Francisco environmentalists.” Conservative farmers and ranchers in the west who want to conserve their way of life and property values are speaking out against hydraulic fracturing as a procedure to extract natural gas. Some oppose the pipeline. In this way, they are in solidarity with radical thinkers and with ecofeminists and ecowomanists.

Ecofeminism is a theory and social movement that draws a connection between the oppression of woman and the oppression of the natural world. The logic of dominion becomes acts of domination that uses and abuses the earth in much the same way that some men have used and abused the bodies of women. Mountain top removal to get to coal, hydraulic fracturing, drilling deeper and deeper in to the sea to get to oil, even when geological scientists have yet to development technologies to contain oil spills, over fishing in the earth’s waters, the destruction of coral reefs, the disappearance of various species, and the refusal to acknowledge the ecological damage done by the burning of fossil fuels is akin to rape. Such acts may also be understood as warfare against nature.

I want to propose ecowomanism as a fierce response to this injustice. I say that a womanist warning is that the ecological havoc that causes killer weather events is a result of the unbreakable link between act and consequence. At some point, even abused women rise up and fight back. Such is the case with the natural world. A womanist love loves fiercely, and Karma does not forgive. Moreover, human disregard and disrespect for the natural world is and will continue to create conditions that will lead to more war between human communities fighting over control of natural resources. In the future water will be the issue.

As we consider how to live with a lighter carbon footprint upon the earth, it is important to remember that the changes that must come will entail all aspects of human beings living together in community—urban, suburban and rural planning, transportation systems and how we most efficiently utilize solar and wind power. This work ought to necessarily be done in a spirit of cooperation and through an ethos of power-with, not power-over. This work will require us to think about the justice we owe to the natural world as much as we think about the justice we owe to each other.

The joy of the holiday season is the faith and hope that we make the room in our hearts and minds to reason together and to solve these problems through the gift of radical love made incarnate in the world through the Christ that lives inside each of us, no matter our faith or no faith traditions. And all of creation will sing “Joy to the World.”

Joy to the earth!
The Savior reigns
Let us our songs employ
While fields and floods,
rocks, hills, and plains,
repeat the sounding joy
repeat the sounding joy
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

Works Cited

“Joy to the World.” The New National Baptist Hymnal. Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1990.

“Joy to the World.” YouTube 23 Dec 2011 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29_2vm3hKFo.