**Connections with Creation**

**December 2022**

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**December 4 – Second Sunday of Advent**

Trees appear in all three readings this week: the axe at the roots, a shoot from the stump, a root that rises. These tree images evoke ecological relationships between wounding and healing, growth and ruin, death and life. Indeed, in a forest one may notice how many new trees are sprouting from stumps or fallen, decomposing trunks. Forest ecologists teach that a tree’s life span can be roughly divided into thirds: a third as a growing and living tree, a third having died and still standing, and a third fallen and serving as a nurse log for newly emerging trees and plants. While John’s axe threatens, Jesus in his death on the tree becomes a nurse log for the world. Exploring a forest and noticing how many trees are growing from older ones that have died, one may wonder if every tree is a shoot from a stump of Jesse.

### December 11 – Third Sunday of Advent

This week’s readings imagine the wilderness becoming a place of healing and justice. While contemporary dominant cultures have often characterized wilderness as the opposite of human society, Indigenous wisdoms and biblical perspectives do not strictly segregate “nature” and “culture.” Increasingly, urban planners, medical professionals, and activists point to the health and equity benefits of “rewilding” human communities. The presence of trees and wild spaces in neighborhoods reduces family violence, raises academic test scores, and improves mental health. Simply walking through natural areas in cities produces mental states that are similar to prayer and meditation. Trees help cool city blocks overheated by a carbon- fueled climate. Jesus makes clear that John the Baptist’s preaching is not the standard urban planning of the palaces. It emerges from the fertile place where wilderness meets city, calling for equity and justice throughout the land—perhaps an image of what we now call environmental justice.

### December 18 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

The fundamental cycle of mammalian life—gestation and birth—is a key image in today’s readings. In the New Testament, the significance of Jesus’ birth is more a theological truth (“in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” Col. 1:19) than a biological anomaly. The wonder of a “virgin birth” is an established pattern in nature. Formally known as parthenogenesis, it has been scientifically witnessed among birds, reptiles, insects, and fish. However, the more common cycle of conception and birth is itself a holy wonder, a sacred sign: in today’s readings it is a sign of God with us in the ongoing, evolving cycles of our creaturehood. “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel [God with us]” (Isa. 7:14).

### December 24 – Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve

“Joy to the earth” is not just a rhetorical flourish. Modern science is beginning to recognize what traditional spiritualities have long known: that nonhuman creatures experience joy. Many of us have seen pets exhibiting joy at a meal, at a river, or even simply because we’ve returned home to them. Elephants trumpet in chorus at the birth of a newborn. Chimpanzees sometimes dance when they encounter a waterfall. Even trees send signals to each other of their need or well-being. “Just to be is a blessing,” wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Joy for this blessing of being trumpets, barks, dances, meows, sings, and waves its limbs across the earth. In Psalm 96 and its hymn paraphrase “Joy to the world” (ELW 267) we are part of a cosmic choir in which “heaven and nature sing” for joy at the wonder of the incarnation, God’s bodily presence with us in our creaturehood.

### December 25 – Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day

Did you witness sunrise this Christmas morning? For those of us in the northern hemisphere it rose far to the south on our eastern horizon, and it will track low across the sky until the end of this short winter day. The sunrise will now daily creep further north. If you missed it, you will have another chance to find the place of the Christmas morning sunrise—well before next Christmas. In June, on the commemoration of John the Baptist just as the sun sets in the west, the long shadows will point across the landscape to the southeast, to the point on the horizon where the sun rises on Christmas Day. John the Baptist—like the church through the ages—points to the coming Messiah, and our ancestors in faith arranged our festival days so that the cosmos would continuously resound with expectant joy at Immanuel, God with us.