

Creation speaks

An Aboriginal Christian's reflections

Adrian Jacobs

Creation has a voice. Creation tells, declares, proclaims, and pours forth speech. Creation displays knowledge, and its voice goes out to the whole world.

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19:1–4)¹*

Hearing the witness of creation

When westerners hear about Balaam's conversation with a donkey, they want to investigate the donkey's anatomy, to understand how it could talk. (Never mind that Western Christianity's emphasis on original sin is rooted in a story about a talking snake.) Aboriginal people, like Middle Eastern people, are much more likely to want to know what the donkey said.

Western Christianity has been afraid of hearing the voice of creation. Those who suggest that the words of Psalm 19 are true immediately confront charges of animism. But according to the Apostle Paul, creation is alive; it waits, is frustrated, has a will, and groans:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of

the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:19–23)

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds praised God. Disturbed by the noisy celebration, the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke his disciples. Jesus responded, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). Creation praises the Creator. If we truly hear the voice of creation, we will be directed to the Creator and to Jesus Christ the Co-Creator.

Those who fear God and do what is right

According to Romans 1:18–20, God’s awesome power and divine nature are revealed through creation. Creation communicates clearly enough about God’s will that humanity in its wickedness is left without excuse. The witness of creation makes people accountable. Human beings are answerable for their response to creation’s revelation of the Creator’s judgment and mercy.

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Before European settlers came to North America with the gospel of Jesus Christ, Aboriginal people were answerable for their response to the witness of creation to its Creator. Evidence of a true response to creation’s witness is a righteous life and reverence for the Creator. Peter told Cornelius, the first Gentile convert to Christ, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35). A prayerful and

generous man, Cornelius was responding to the God of Israel, the Creator, according to the light he had.

With Hiawatha, Deganawidah (a Huron adopted among the Mohawks) founded the Five (later Six) Nations Iroquois Confederacy. Iroquoian oral history recalls a time of fratricidal warfare

and cannibalism among the Iroquoian people, prior to the coming of Deganawidah. His influence ended this fighting among brothers and united the Iroquois into a strong confederacy through the Great Law of Peace. This pre-Columbian constitution codified standards of human dignity in a consensual decision-making process. Deganawidah was the kind of person described by Peter: he feared the Creator and did what was right.

We revere this cultural hero. Oral tradition declares him born of a virgin, one who will return to the earth as the Peacemaker, and whose name should no longer be spoken except reverently in official settings. Was Deganawidah born of a virgin? No. Only Jesus Christ has been born in this miraculous way. Was Deganawidah the appearance of Christ to the Iroquoian people? No. He was a man who responded favourably to the Creator's influence through creation and conscience.

To the Romans, Paul wrote, "When Gentiles [or Aboriginals], who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom. 2:14–15). The Iroquoian people repented of their warfare and cannibalism under the influence of Deganawidah. This man did what was right because he had great respect for the Creator.

The Creator's attitude toward animals

The law of Moses reveals God's care for animals and lays out standards for human care for them, as specified in Exodus 21–23. Animals who injure humans or other animals face judgment (Exod. 21:28–36). Animals have value, and penalties are to be imposed on those who steal them. People are responsible for their animals' actions. One who finds a lost animal incurs obligations to care for it. Animals are to be granted the rest of the weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath year every seven years, and the year of jubilee every fifty years.

Firstborn animals are to be dedicated to the Lord (Exod. 34:19–20; Lev. 27:26–27). The blood and fat of animals are sacred (Lev. 7:22–27; 17). To teach people about the holiness of God, the law divides animals into clean and unclean categories

(Leviticus 11). Animals are to be purebred (Lev. 19:19). Bestiality is condemned (Lev. 18:23; 20:1, 5, 16). Animals without defect or blemish are types of Christ, reflecting his purity and sinlessness (Lev. 22:17–25, Heb. 9:14).

The law of Moses enjoins a compassion for animal life not unlike today's concern for the preservation of species. The strange prohibition against boiling a young goat in its mother's milk (Exod. 34:26) can be seen as an expression of that compassion: the life-giving milk of the mother goat is not to be the cooking agent for the kid. No physical harm to humans comes of cooking a young goat in its mother's milk. Rather, the practice violates values we usually apply only in human contexts. Consider, for example, our repugnance toward using cosmetics made from fetal tissue. This practice may not bother the reductionist, who sees an aborted child as so many stem cells. But Christians know they are dealing with the body of one made in the image of God.

Solomon the wise said, "The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel" (Prov. 12:10). The command "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" expresses an intention to pay labouring animals well in food (Deut. 25:4). The New Testament Epistles quote this scripture twice, to encourage generous support for those who preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Cor. 9:1–18). Paul in effect uses an ox as a type of a minister of the Word of God.

Jonah's care for a plant and God's care for animals

God commissioned Jonah to proclaim God's judgment on Ninevah. Jonah's preaching resulted in the repentance of everyone, from the king to the least Ninevite. Even the animals fasted and wore sackcloth. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jon. 3:10). God's compassion displeased Jonah. He had resisted going to the Ninevites, precisely because he knew that God abounds in mercy and is so ready to relent from punishing. God's mercy made Jonah angry enough to want to die.

In one day God caused a plant to grow up to shield Jonah from the heat of the day. The next day the plant withered and died, and again Jonah became angry enough to die. God proceeded to

give Jonah a great lesson on divine compassion for people and animals: “Then the LORD said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, *and also many animals?*’” (Jon. 4:10–11; my italics). God cared about the people and the animals of Nineveh.

Creation in harmony with God the Creator

The Bible is full of examples of animals that were obedient to the Creator. At creation, animals permitted Adam to name them. Pairs of all the animals of the earth found Noah’s ark and obediently went in, while most of humanity obstinately refused to enter and be saved. This picture conforms to the Hopi recollection of the people who perished in the flood: they were selfish and evil. Sometimes the rest of creation has been more obedient to the

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According to Exodus 4–12, an obedient creation enacts God’s presence and judgment. The rods of Moses and Aaron became snakes as a sign of God’s presence with these leaders of Israel. Water turned into blood. Frogs, gnats, flies, locusts, and hail all did their part

to execute God’s judgment on Egypt. A plague descended on livestock and boils on people. Light refused to shine on the Egyptians, and death took their firstborn. These stories reflect what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote that God’s judgment is revealed through creation.

As the Exodus story unfolds, creation again cooperates with God in providing for and protecting the children of Israel. The Red Sea opened to let them escape, and then closed upon Pharaoh’s army in judgment. When Moses threw a branch into the water, bitter and unpalatable water became sweet. Heaven rained down bread, quail flew in to feed hungry Israel, and water gushed out of a rock that followed Israel in the wilderness (see 1 Cor. 10:4). This rock was a type of Christ.

As Israel entered the land of Canaan, the hornet aided their conquest (Exod. 23:28; Josh. 24:12). Ravens brought meat and bread every day to Elijah during a drought (1 Kings 17:6). The universe stood still for Joshua for almost a day (Josh. 10:12–14). The earth reversed its rotation as a sign to Hezekiah that he would be healed and live fifteen more years (Isa. 38:7–8). Hail fell upon the enemies of the people of God (Josh. 10:11; Ps. 18:11–15). Germs, fire, seismic activity, and snakes executed God’s judgment on rebellious Israel in the wilderness (Exod. 33:35; Num. 11:1-3; 11:33–34; 14:37; 16:31–35; 21:4–9; 24:8–9).

Creation that obeyed Jesus, the Co-Creator

Again in the New Testament scriptures, an obedient creation serves God. A virgin conceived to clothe the Son of God with flesh. A star appeared that “spoke” to and led wise men to Jesus. Water turned into wine in the first miracle Jesus performed. Sickness yielded to the touch and voice of Jesus. Demons obeyed his command. Gravity yielded to allow Jesus to walk on water and to rise from the Mount of Olives after his resurrection. A command from Jesus stilled a storm. Death gave up its captives to Jesus. A fish scooped up a coin to give to Peter to pay some taxes. A donkey colt that had never been ridden carried Jesus into Jerusalem. A cock crowed on cue to rebuke Peter in his denial of the Lord. An obedient creation reveals Jesus’ authority over it.

Creation obeys the Holy Spirit–empowered church

In the Acts of the Apostles, the forces of creation continue to be subject to Jesus Christ and his disciples as they act in the power of the Holy Spirit. Sickness gave way to the touch, command, and even shadow of the apostles and other believers. Death yielded to Peter’s command and could not keep Paul at Lystra. Evil spirits had to obey the voice of Christians. Death fulfilled Peter’s pronouncement of judgment on Ananias and Sapphira for their sin of lying to the Holy Spirit. Doors opened of their own accord to let Peter out of prison. Worms ate proud Herod (Acts 12:23). While the prisoners Paul and Silas worshiped the Creator, an earthquake shook the doors open and loosed the chains of every prisoner. Creation recognizes the authority of the Creator and the Co-

Creator Jesus in the Holy Spirit—empowered commands and actions of the church.

A. J. Gordon cites the testimony of church history to support his call for a present-day ministry of healing in the church.² The church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Clement testify to post-apostolic healings in the church.³ Church historians have attested to healings into the fourth century.⁴ Reformation movements in the church—among Waldenses, Moravians, Huguenots, Covenanters, Friends, Baptists, and Methodists—include testimonies of healings.⁵ The modern Pente-

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costal/charismatic movement abounds with accounts of healings. The Creator is still the Creator and able to re-create as the human situation demands.

God the Creator and the Re-Creator

Nothing less than a God who is Creator can satisfy the spiritual sensibilities of Aboriginal people. To the Aboriginal mind, a Creator who can still create is a true Creator. Do not preach a disempowered one-time creator who is impotent in the face of human need. God's

name is I Am, not I Was, or I Will Be. God always was, and is, and ever will be. The Creator never changes.

God is not only Creator but is also Re-Creator. Human sin and the death that follows it have necessitated the Creator's re-creative power. The one who has created is able to re-create those who have become children of the devil through sin.

Aboriginal people have an awareness that life is not completely as the Creator originally intended. Something has disturbed the initial harmony. Sin is disharmony created by selfishness and greed. The maker/trickster Nanabozho is falling into his own traps. The Peacemaker is gone, and things are falling apart. The Ghost Dancer looked forward to a messianic age of new creation or re-creation. The Aboriginal prophecies of the last days are being fulfilled as the old ways pass away. The people are gathering, and fewer know what they are supposed to do. They anticipate a golden age of universal goodwill. I believe that Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of these Aboriginal longings and needs.

The influence of the Creator now and yet to come

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, which is nothing less than the spreading persuasive influence of the Creator on earth. The Creator's love for all creation challenges our sinful selfishness and greed. Evil spirits that mar and corrupt God's creation are soundly defeated by the master of all spirits, Jesus Christ. Sickness now yields to the touch of Jesus' hand and the hand of his representatives on earth. People are seeing their need for a Saviour and are calling on the name of Jesus Christ. Those who drink to excess become sober. Liars become truth tellers. Abusers take responsibility for their actions and ask for forgiveness. Thieves begin to work and give to others. So-called elders quit their immoral ways. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus Christ is powerful enough to re-create us. Then he can gradually restore us to all the Creator intended when he made us. This lifelong process of growth follows our re-creation. A person grows spiritually through the Word of God, communion with the Holy Spirit, participation with other believers in the body of Christ, and through dialogue and interaction with people who do not yet know Christ as Lord of their lives.

A Mountain Ute, an Onkwehonweh, and the Re-Creator

"Are you a brother?" came the challenge from the stocky Mountain Ute Indian as my Lakota friend and I settled into the steamy comfort of the hotel hot tub. We were set to enjoy a relaxing evening conversation, after meeting as the Native American Advisory Council for the International Bible Society. We were not expecting such an aggressive question.

We introduced ourselves and our vocation as ministers. What we could gather from this Ute Aboriginal was his advocacy for a native revolution. His basic premise was, "If you really are a native brother, then you must be for revolution, as I am." Because we are ministers of Jesus Christ, he doubted that we were truly native. In our advisory council meetings, I promoted the contextualization of Christian truth in the Aboriginal worldview. I shared Paul's approach to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:16–34, and now it was my opportunity for a practical application of these principles.

I told of my understanding of God as Creator. Our Ute friend continued to argue aggressively against us. I continued to speak about God as Creator and said that God had made me Onkwehonweh. After a half-hour of spirited conversation, the Ute asked me, “Do you live as Onkwehonweh?” I said, “Yes,” and explained some of my Iroquoian values. I then asked him if he lived as Ute. With a noticeable quietness in his voice, he answered, “No.” I then proceeded to explain how we humans do not live as the Creator made us, and that is why we need Jesus Christ. At this point I shared my testimony about how Jesus Christ became my Lord and Saviour. In a contemplative tone, he said, “That’s neat.” I believe it was my approach that sought to identify with his native consciousness of God as Creator that opened his heart to the message of my own reconciliation with our Creator.

Though our conversation lasted only about forty minutes, I believe we were part of the process that is leading him to an acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord. Our prayer then and now is that other labourers may reach him with a further incarnational witness. May he too be in the great throng of worshipers from every tribe, people, tongue, and nation that stands before the throne of God, the Creator and Re-Creator.

Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

² A. J. Gordon, *The Ministry of Healing: Miracles of Cure in All Ages* (Chicago: F. H. Revell, 1882; repr. Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1961). Citations are to the Christian Publications edition.

³ Ibid, 60–61.

⁴ Ibid, 61–64.

⁵ Ibid, 65–84.

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