

Hymn to creation: The Father's world

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

I recall that we used to sing “This Is My Father’s World” at the beginning of Sunday school sessions, and we would sing it every evening at church camp as we sat on the hard wooden benches. I haven’t chosen that hymn for worship for many years because I know how important it has been to move beyond masculine images in theology and liturgy. But I’m going to go out on a limb and use it soon because it says something profoundly important: the world is God’s. The earth is the Lord’s, as the Psalmist put it—which is to say, not ours. We’re temporary guests, here on the earth for the time being. The place doesn’t belong to us.

Several decades ago Karl Barth and Emil Brunner had an important discussion which turned into a rancorous argument over natural theology. Barth’s blunt response to Brunner’s apologia for revelation in nature was “Nein.” Late in their lives the antagonists began to talk to each other again, and near the end of his life Barth was saying that our final word should be one of gratitude, not only for God’s revelation in Jesus Christ but also, I assume, for the blessings of life in God’s world.

William Sloane Coffin says we have “divorced nature from nature’s God” and that we view nature essentially as a tool box. Coffin adds his voice to many others who understand that the environmental crisis is at least partially a theological crisis, and that one of the by-products of modernity is the desacralizing of nature. It’s not enough to be smart ecologically so we don’t exhaust natural resources. What we need beyond caution, Coffin says, is reverence.

I do not ordinarily think of Coffin as an advocate for creation theology. I’m more inclined to look to him for instructions and inspiration about social justice issues. So it is striking to see in his *Credo* a section on nature, and a typically eloquent expression of reverence and wonder.

At Thanksgiving, even though lectionary texts and the liturgical calendar don’t acknowledge the U.S. holiday, I’ve always been compelled to use the season, when we are thinking about the earth’s fertility and productivity, to affirm one of our basic and most critical beliefs: this is God’s world and we are temporary tenants. Poet and

essayist Wendell Berry says, “We are allowed to make no exceptions—every person’s obligation toward creation is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15: ‘Keep it.’”

Another good thing about “This Is My Father’s World”: it makes a remarkable and biblical assertion that “all nature sings.” That phrase echoes the Psalmist’s words: “All the trees of the forest sing for joy” (96:12). And that makes me think of a Wendell Berry poem that I usually pull off the shelf about this time of year: “Great trees, / outspreading and upright / . . . a timbered choir / O light come down to / earth, be praised.”