

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

behalf of the earth itself, as we face our era of unprecedented ecological challenges and opportunities.

As I believe that in the end it is our love for the world that will inspire our most creative and compassionate dwelling on the earth, this is first and foremost a book of love. And so I dedicate it to the three great loves that inspired and sustained me during this project: love of creation and of the earth, love of the Weybridge Church (aka the Weybridge Wanderers), and love of Julia and Reverie, my sun and moon and stars.

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LEMON FAIR RIVER, VERMONT



Speak with the earth, and it will teach you . . .

—JOB 12:8

From the west-facing sunroom of my cabin-sized perch in Vermont's Champlain Valley, I look out on a muddy river slimmed to its summer banks, hills of mixed hardwood and clayplain forest crowned with distant Adirondack peaks, cumulus and a tower of cumulus congestus climbing into cobalt sky, and cloud shadows drifting across fields of clover and wild carrot. Although I've never seen a day quite like this one, the landscape immediately strikes a chord of intelligibility and integrity. With an emptying mind beginning to mirror the landscape, I feel myself belonging again, enfolded into a world that makes sense, a world that holds together with meaning: rivers making their way to the sea, clouds forming over ocean currents, rain falling

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on the mountains and running again as creeks and streams, forest communities clinging to the riverbanks and venturing inland. While we humans might wonder whether life has any meaning, the world itself coheres. "In my room," as poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "the world is beyond my understanding; / But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four / hills and a cloud."

A few miles downstream from here, near where the Lemon Fair River empties into Otter Creek, the Weybridge Congregational Church sits on its own hillside perch across the valley from Snake Mountain. It was almost a decade ago now that this small Open & Affirming, Creation Justice congregation of the United Church of Christ (UCC) welcomed me as their then twenty-seven-year-old pastor. Having studied theology and begun to get my feet wet in pastoral ministry in Chicago and Boston, moving to rural Vermont was a dramatic shift in context. For my first few years with the church, I operated largely as I had been educated to operate—that is, as an interpreter of the sacred text of the faith tradition within the traditions and context of the local community. Each week I turned to the Revised Common Lectionary and read the assigned scripture passages. I read commentaries on those passages, and commentaries on those commentaries. I held the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. And then each Sunday I gathered together whatever I could glean from that reading to share with the community, offering the sermon like a word casserole at a homiletic potluck.

It took me a few years to realize that while I was focused on reading and interpreting layers of written text, the congregation was engaged in a different type of reading. On Sunday mornings, I would stand up and announce the lectionary calendar for the week—today is the First Sunday of Advent, today is the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time, today is Pentecost. After my words of welcome, we would open the microphone up to share joys and celebrations. Slowly I came to realize that during this time the congregation would announce and celebrate a different type of calendar, and speak to a different way of locating where

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we were in the spiritual journey of the year. "Today I celebrate my first bluebird sighting!" (Today is the First Sunday of True Spring). "This week I took a meandering drive through the mountains and the fall colors were magnificent!" (Today is the Sunday of Peak Leaves). "Today I celebrate hearing the grouse again in my woods." (Today is the First Sunday of the Grouse Drumming). "Today I celebrate the sound of wild geese calling overhead." (Today is the Third Sunday of either Stick Season or Mud Season, depending on whether the geese are leaving or returning, late fall or early spring). While I thought we were following the church lectionary and were reading from the calendar of assigned texts, this Vermont church, more attuned to the local earth than I was, taught me that our journey was also one of following the phenological calendar—the calendar of when things happen on the landscape—and that as a community we were reading together from this eco-liturgical lectionary for glimpses of God in the seasons of the natural world and its cycle of happenings.

Trained in philosophy, theology, and biblical hermeneutics, I was educated in that venerable, thousands-years-old tradition of humans searching for God and meaning by way of turning towards the written word and sorting out layer upon layer of textual meaning, sifting through written words about written words about written words. Every now and then one might find a word or an interpretation of a word worth its weight in gold, and so the intellectual, hermeneutical search can take on the feel of a treasure hunt. Slowly, slowly, my Vermont church taught me that there was a different way of reading for God and meaning. Slowly, slowly, they showed me what it looked like and felt like to read for God in the landscape and events of the earth. They taught me that the church was not just a place to read and interpret the written scriptures of God, but a place to read and interpret the expressions of God that emanate constantly and from every corner of God's creation.

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Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it, Read it. God, whom you want to discover never wrote that book with ink. Instead, God set before your eyes the things that God had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: "God made me!"

—AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

As human beings, we are given at least one, and often more than one window onto the world. We listen and the world sounds. We look and things appear and stand out in their thisness. We touch, smell, taste, and breathe in through our lungs and our skin and are in constant commerce and conversation with that which is beyond us. Ever since the earth started sensing itself and the universe through these human windows, the things that appeared and that spoke to our senses constellated themselves into the material of our stories and creative expressions. In other words, the things of the world are the means by which we know what we know and by which we move towards what we don't know. First things first, we are always and already in contact with the world—earthlings eating and exploring the things of earth—and only afterwards do we wonder about the world, becoming that part of the earth that turns its gaze back upon itself. Religion, philosophy, science, economics, and culture are all secondary and derivative productions of our earthiness, which is primal, primary, and generative.

Ancient Greek philosophers called this essential congruity between humanity and nature *logos*—similar to, but not exactly the same as, concepts such as order, reason, truth, *dharma*. Since the same *logos* that pervades nature pervades the human being as well, we, as part of a coherent universe, are capable of using our reason to understand and align ourselves with the ways of nature. Around the time of Jesus, this key philosophical term was gaining theological resonance as well, as

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in the writing of Hellenistic Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria, for whom *logos* came to signify both the reason and order of the world as God made it to be as well as a type of intermediary figure or interpretive key that makes it possible to bridge the gap between creation and the Creator, and between humanity and God.

It's against this rich, centuries' long conversation on the meaning of *logos* that the author of the Gospel of John makes a decisive move to identify the Christ figure with *logos* in John 1:1, setting the stage for early Christian theologians to argue that the same *logos* incarnate as Christ is pervasive throughout nature and throughout scripture. Theologians like Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 202), and Origen (ca. 184–ca. 253) began developing the notion of Christ as *logos*, and each argued against certain spiritual impulses that viewed the material world as evil or cursed by affirming both the Hebrew Bible's notion of the original goodness and blessing of creation and the New Testament's vision of the incarnation—of God becoming flesh, of the divine fully embracing materiality by becoming it. Although they didn't use this phrase yet, the seeds of what is called the "two books" theory of God stretch back to the beginnings of Christian theology—the idea or metaphor that God writes or inspires not one book, but two: the book of nature and the book of scripture.

Beginning at least as early as Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the two books theory became more explicitly formulated and affirmed. For example, even before Augustine wrote about the "great book" that consists of "the very appearance of created things," the desert monk Anthony of Egypt (251–356) was preaching about the book of nature. When a philosopher visited him in the desert and asked him how such a learned person could live in the desert without the benefit of books, Anthony responded: "My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, they are at my hand."

The two books tradition was developed into the medieval period by theologians like Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena,

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Hugh of Saint Victor, Hildegard von Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Meister Eckhart. Rather than two books, Eriugena, for example, used the image of two shoes. "Christ wears 'two shoes' in the world: Scripture and nature," he wrote. "Both are necessary to understand the Lord, and at no stage can creation be seen as a separation of things from God." Meister Eckhart looked at a caterpillar and saw that "every single creature is full of God and is a book about God." "If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar," he wrote, "I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature."

Eckhart and other medieval mystics speak of a world that is thoroughly ecosemiotic, wherein every aspect of the world—from the insects on the ground to the stars in the sky—is saturated with theological meaning, each thing bearing the Creator's signature. Aquinas, steeped in the Aristotelian project of trying to understand the immediate, material world as it appears to our senses, also affirmed the study of the book of nature. Arguing against the spiritualist impulse to skip over the material world and focus solely on the otherworldly, Aquinas argued that knowledge of creation and of the creatures was essential to knowledge of God. With a simple declaration that reads haunting and prophetic for our age of climate chaos and anthropogenic ecological peril, Aquinas wrote that "a mistake about creation is a mistake about God."

During the Reformation, Luther and Calvin both embraced and also started to distance their theologies from the two books theory. While one can see Luther's embrace of the book of nature in his emphasis on the incarnation and in his own affirmation of the everyday sacrality of creaturely and bodily life, it is his understanding of what he called "The Real Presence of Christ" in the sacrament of communion that has the greatest implications for the two books theory. With his "Real Presence" theory, Luther was seeking a way to reconcile the simple, declarative statement from the communion ritual—when Jesus says, "This is my

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body"—with the post-Ascension scriptures that describe Jesus as being "at the right hand of God" (for example, Ephesians 1:20–23).

The theological dilemma and debate at the time was: if Christ is seated at the right hand of God, how then can Christ be present in the bread and wine as well? With his Real Presence theory, Luther was arguing on two fronts—first, against other reformers like Calvin, who claimed that Christ was only symbolically present in the elements, as well as against the Roman Catholic Church's position of transubstantiation, which argued that in the moment of consecrating the elements, the priest effects a sudden and complete change in the essential nature of the elements such that the bread is no longer bread but Christ's body, and the wine is no longer wine but Christ's blood. Luther—steeped in the Psalms and the image we find there of God's hand signifying God's steadfast presence everywhere, throughout the whole earth (see Psalm 139:7–10)—argued that *yes*, Christ is at God's right hand, and since God's right hand is everywhere and within everything, Christ also is present everywhere and in everything. And so for Luther, bread didn't have to be miraculously turned into Christ because bread already was Christ, and not in a figurative or symbolic way, but literally, physically, materially. In other words, the material world was thoroughly saturated with the presence of the sacred. To illustrate how bread could be both bread and Christ at the same time, he used the image of the iron on a blacksmith's anvil: the red-hot iron is simultaneously both iron and fire. "The power of God must be essentially present in all places, even the tiniest leaf," he wrote, "[which means] Christ is around us and in us in all places . . . Christ is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even a rope."

With Calvin we also find a significant embrace of the two books theory. Following Paul in Romans 1:20, Calvin argued that all humans, through their encounter with the natural world, should be able to experience enough in that encounter with nature alone to know God. *Sensus divinitas*—a sense of the divine, as he called it—was an essential

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part of being human. Nature, as Calvin imagined it in his favorite metaphor, is like a theater where God's glory is constantly on display. And yet, on account of human sin we do not know God fully in nature, nor see God clearly on display as we should. The greatest sin, in Calvin's view, is not found among the seven deadly sins of pride, sloth, avarice, etc., but is instead the dulling of our sense perceptions that makes it difficult to sense God in nature. Therefore, Calvin argues, God gave us the second book, not only the "general revelation" of nature, as it was called, but the "special revelation" of the Bible.

Interestingly, although Luther based his argument on grace rather than sin, asserting that Christians did not need the intermediary of the priest to learn about God but could study God directly for themselves, he also came to the conclusion that it was the Bible alone that was needed for salvation, *sola scriptura*. With Luther's German Bible and Calvin's Geneva Bible, among other translations into the vernacular, the Reformation set the stage not only for the revolutionary forces of democracy, capitalism, and the industrial revolution, but also the unmistakable and unquestioned prioritization of the second book (the written book of scripture) over and above the first book (the living book of nature).

Over the course of the next few centuries in Western thought, generally speaking, the two books went their separate ways. Theologians tended to focus more and more on the book of scripture and less and less on the book of nature. Scientists like Galileo, Francis Bacon, and Charles Darwin embraced the metaphor of the book of nature, but they read it in a different way and for different purposes. The book of scripture was thought to lead to knowledge about spiritual reality, while the book of nature was thought to reveal material reality, as if the spiritual didn't arise from and express itself in the material, or as if the material weren't charged with the creativity and animating principle of *spiritus*. Once spirit and matter were split in this epistemological, intellectual sense, and once spirit was elevated above matter in the

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realm of religion, values, and ethics, it became possible to assault and abuse the material realm at a scale and pace that the world had never seen—or rather, that the earth had never witnessed. In relegating the interpretation of the sacred to the book of scripture, in looking for God only in words written by humans, Western thought embarked on a course of anthropocentric hermeneutics that has resulted in widespread disregard for nature's diverse otherness, leading to the climate chaos and mass species extinction that now characterizes the Anthropocene we have officially commenced.



I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.

—Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

Not only do Christians and Christian theologians tend to seek God primarily in the book of scripture, but in the book of scripture itself we tend to focus only on the human characters. The classical phrase for this in theology is *Incurvatus in Se*, the self turned in on itself. We look for ourselves in all things, even in God. To try to understand God by way of reading and reflecting on words written by humans about humans would be like trying to understand a forest by walking around Manhattan and staring up at the human-built canopy of skyscrapers. In doing so, we might learn something about human nature, but not about forest nature.

Somewhere along the way, it seems, we've confused the order and the relationship between God's two books. We've denigrated the book

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of nature and exalted the book of scripture. We've thought that scripture was the key to understanding nature, and not vice versa. We've forgotten how the book of scripture—as beautiful as it can be—is but the slimmest of volumes that makes up the shortest of chapters in the epic, sprawling tome that is the book of nature. The world in all of its immediacy, diversity, and untamed extravagance could never be made to fit into a narrative plot nor a single volume bound by two covers. It is a book containing all things, even the uncontainability and unobtainability of the idea of God. When it comes to reading the book of nature, we haven't even begun to turn the first page.

What if we were to take the two books theory seriously again? Rather than try to reconcile the two books (there has been enough written about the relationship between “science” and “religion”), what if we were to swing the pendulum back and refocus on the book of nature as primary? Like Thoreau, what if we were to “speak a word for Nature,” especially as it relates to our quest for understanding God and for navigating the territory of the spiritual life and its ethical summons during our era of climate crisis? That is the aim of this book: to “speak with the earth,” as the book of Job puts it, to turn again towards creation in hopes of learning about the Creator, to return our attention to God's first book in order to listen and try to recover what we may be presently overlooking in our narrowed focus on the second book and its human concerns in an age where the earth is calling out with a clear but mute cry for us to think beyond ourselves and to seek the flourishing of the whole to which we are bound and to which we belong.

To that end I offer here a type of “field guide to the Bible.” This is not a naturalist's field guide à la Audubon or Peterson, although I hope it shares something of their plein air invitation to get out there and explore, perhaps with book in hand, and see for yourself the wonders of the world. While there are resources that one can find along those lines, my aim is not to document and describe the flora and fauna

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recorded in the Bible. My aim is to reread the Bible in a living, breathing, yearning, determined search for God from the perspective of nature. My aim is not to read the book of nature through the lens of scripture, as has been a major trend in Christian theology, but the opposite—to read the book of scripture through the lens of the book of nature, to foreground the presence of the natural world, and to focus on creation and the more-than-human drama of life as it presents itself in its elemental forms.

To this end, the four major sections of this book reflect the four classical elements (water, fire, earth, air), and correspond to four prominent aspects of nature that hold powerful sway in the stories of scripture: Rivers, Mountains, Trees, and Clouds. These sections could well have been focused on other aspects of nature. The ones chosen here were simply the aspects of the world that spoke most clearly to me when I was envisioning and working on this project.

The essays that follow are essays in the literal, etymological, adventurous sense of the word—attempts at reading nature by being a body in nature, attempts at reading the first book as it makes its presence known and shapes the second book of scripture from within. While these are essays of constructive theology, they are not arguments in the academic sense. I aim to enact ecological hermeneutics and to give expression to a type of contemporary creation spirituality. My hope and prayer is that by reading differently, we can live differently.

The story we have been reading and telling about who we are and who God is and what the world is like has proven inadequate, small, and self-destructive. “A mistake about creation,” as Aquinas put it, “is a mistake about God.” And yet, I am hopeful and excited to share this work as a small part in this great conversation of our times because we are only beginning to understand and return proper attention to the book of nature. There is so much yet to discover, so many new pages to read. I trust that deep in the story and poetry of the book of nature there is more than enough life-giving and life-changing revelation to

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transform how curious creatures like us see the world and make meaning and beauty and action and care of it. I trust there is enough to change how we live in the world. I trust there is enough to lead us ever deeper in love and knowledge of the God in whom we live and move and have our being, if we but draw close to the glory of God in all of God's creations; if we but speak and listen and learn with the earth, as earth and in passionate, intimate conversation with earth—earth to earth.

RIVERS



CREATION ELEMENT INTERLUDE: WATER

*...by the word of God heavens existed long ago
and an earth was formed out of water
and by means of water.*

—2 PETER 3:5

In the beginning, when the earth was formless and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, a wind from God swept over the surface of the waters. In the beginning, the earth was not yet, and as the surplus of the sudden flaring forth was settling, one of the massive clouds of dust and gas collapsed to form our solar system. At the center, the sun-ball formed into place like a gemstone, and as the dusty halo spun around it, a molten earth cooled into shape. Ice-filled and water-logged asteroids bombarded the young planet, and hydrogen from the solar cloud joined with oxygen in the atmosphere, and water,