

P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E.



Cosmic Liturgy

A Lecture by Thomas Berry

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The Thomas Berry Project
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Lecture Engagement Guide

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Overview

Thomas Berry's lecture explores the evolving human experience of the sacred. He begins by describing the natural world as a "cosmic liturgy" that invites human awe, intimacy, and participation. Drawing on Indigenous practices and early civilizations, Berry emphasizes how humans were once deeply integrated with the universe, celebrating its rhythms and recognizing their interdependence with all forms of life. Over time, however, the emergence of historical realism in Western religious traditions shifted the focus from the sacredness of the cosmos to particular historical events, culminating in a worldview dominated by secular, scientific realm that often excludes the observer and neglects the spiritual dimension of the universe. Berry argues that this separation has led to a sense of alienation from the Earth, with nature often treated as a resource rather than a sacred presence. He calls for a "Second Exodus," a return to a spiritual and ethical engagement with the natural world, proposing the creation of new liturgies that celebrate the universe's evolutionary milestones. By re-establishing communion with the cosmos and recognizing the sacredness of Earth, Berry envisions a renewed human consciousness capable of honoring the interconnectedness, beauty, and wonder of all life.

Transcript

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. It is a delight to be back here this September 2000. A momentous year for all of us, I am sure. I'll speak tonight about cosmic liturgy. It has to do with how we experience time, because the calendar is the primary reference as regards sacred time, and what we are concerned with this evening is sacred time.

If we would go outside at this time in the evening, we would witness the setting of the sun in a gorgeous display of color. The fading sunlight would be reflected by the clouds as they move across the evening sky. This stunning display fascinates the mind with wonder, the imagination, with beauty, emotions with intimacy. So with the autumn color of the leaves, the richness of the harvest, the migration of the birds to warmer regions. Here in the delta region, we have a winter refuge for vast numbers of birds as they return from colder climates. It is all a kind of gorgeous liturgy aimed to overwhelm the human mind. That this order of the universe should be considered a sacred world, and it should be experienced as a cosmic liturgy inviting personal and community participation, is hardly to be wondered at.

Liturgies Based on Universal Presence to the Natural World

In response to this invitation from the natural world, when a child is born to the Omaha Indians the infant is taken out under the sky and presented to the universe with the invocation:

Oh, ye sun, moon, stars. All ye that move in the heavens. I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the first hill. Oh, ye winds, clouds, rain. All ye that move in the air. I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the second hill.

Then the invocation is addressed to the hills, rivers, trees, and all that lives on the Earth, with a corresponding invocation that the child be protected to reach the third hill. Then the invocation to the birds that fly in the air, the animals great and small that dwell in the forests, the insects that move among the grasses. Then a final petition that all creatures everywhere will take care of the child that it may travel beyond the four hills.

This personal intimacy with cosmic power finds expression also with the Sioux Indians, especially in the vision quest at the time of maturity. At this time, while the initiate is fasting on the hillside, the basic symbols are presented to the initiate, symbols that will provide guidance and protection throughout life. And then a song is revealed to the initiate that will enable the person to pass safely through the perils to be encountered at the time of death. This intimacy can be further expressed with the taking of personal names that relate the individual person to some life form or some phenomenon of the natural world.

In 1863 when Black Elk, the Sioux medicine man, was nine years old, he had a remarkable vision of his historical situation acted out in the heavens in the form of the elders presiding over the future, with special attention being given to the role of Black Elk himself. He was a recipient of a remarkable vision of the six grandfathers representing the four directions, the sky, and the Earth. At one moment in the prolonged vision, a great stallion in the heavens sang a song that rang out throughout the universe. As narrated by Black Elk:

His voice was not loud, but it went all over the universe and filled it. There was nothing that did not hear, and it was more beautiful than anything can be. It was so beautiful that nothing anywhere could keep from dancing. The virgins danced, and the circled horses. The leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in the creeks and in the rivers and in the lakes, the four legged and the two legged, and the winged of the air—all danced together to the music of the stallion's song.

I sometimes think that a comparison that could be made with the physicists, when the physicists describe how all the components of the universe are intricately related to each other and nothing exists

apart from everything else. That the universe itself is the Great Self of each individual self, so that each individual mode of being has two presentations of itself, as its individual form and its comprehensive universe form. It is one form, two modes. To tell the story of each individual requires that we tell the story of the universe itself. But it is presented without the wonder, without the deep presence, the psychic presence such as exists here. It doesn't have the beauty, the wonder, or the intimacy exactly. It is kind of a textbook thing, kind of a technical thing that enables the person to understand the universe, but not commune with the universe.

Now liturgy, above all, is a mode of communion of the secular and the sacred. The secular is transformed into the sacred. It is communion with the Divine, communion with all that is beautiful, with all that is wonderful. So the cycles of seasons and the periods of transformation of the cosmological order were celebrated by corresponding rituals in the human order. This we find with the annual thanksgiving celebration of the Iroquois Indians. At this time the various aspects of the natural world were honored by the community in ritual expression. The human community fulfills its role in relation to all the various elements that sustained human life. Ritual relationships were established with the waters and the winds, with the mountains and valleys, the plants, the animals, the lands of the Earth and the sun in the heavens.

So especially in ancient China, the natural world and the human world were seen as existing in a profound synchronicity. This was so close that with the different seasons of the year the entire activity of the human world was altered to be in accord with the natural process. In the ritual book known as the Li Chi, the record of rites for the observances of each season of the year, the observances for each season of the year is prescribed, and if human activities appropriate to the seasons are not carried out then chaos would result. As it says itself in the text:

If in the first month of spring the government proceedings proper to summer weren't carried out, the rain would fall unreasonably, plants and trees would decay prematurely, and the states would be kept in continual fear. If the proceedings proper to autumn weren't carried out there would be great pestilence among the people, boisterous winds would work their violence, rain would descend in torrents. If the proceedings proper to winter weren't carried out, polluted water would produce their destructive effects, snow and frost would prove very injurious, and the first sown seeds would not enter the ground.

The object of all the ceremonies, as the text tells us, is to bring down the spirits from above, even their ancestors, to rectify the relations between ruler and ministers, to maintain the generous feeling between father and son, and the harmony between elder and younger brothers, to adjust the relations between high and low, and to give their proper places to husband and wife. The whole may be said to secure the blessing of heaven. Therefore, and this is one of the most lovely sayings in all Asian thought, therefore humans are the heart and mind of heaven and Earth. Humans are the heart and mind of heaven and Earth, of the universe, and the visible embodiment of the five elements. They live in enjoyment of all flavors, the discrimination of all colors and all modes which are the water, wind, Earth, fire, and wood.

In all these instances the integral relations between the human and the universe were carried out within the single coherent universe. It was an effort to prosper the entire universe. The human response was most crucial for the survival and integral functioning of the planet, as the integral functioning of the planet was needed for proper fulfillment of the human mode of being. There was a constant effort to

situate the human person at the center of the universe, for there is where security is found. There is where all things are validated. This symbol of the center is the central aspect of what was involved. The basic referent is the universe moving in ever-renewing seasonal sequence. The primary symbolism, the center, is activated at any point of the compass. There is an immediate relation with the numinous, or the Divine, or the Great Spirit dimension of the universe. This is the age of shamanic personalities with the techniques of communication with the forces of the universe. This is the first of the sacred periods in western civilization. It's against the background of common human experience in different societies throughout the world.

But then, there are three more great sacred periods in Western civilization, and to understand these correctly and to participate in them is one of the great keys to our whole civilization, to understanding and acting in conformity with our whole civilization. Something happened to all this at the time of the Passover. The other three, the first is this universal presence with the natural world. The second phase of Western civilization is the great liturgy of the Passover and the prophetic, pastoral, Ptolemaic period, basically, because this is the context in which Western civilization was played out all through the classical period, all through the medieval period on into the modern period when another phase took over. Which can be called the scientific, secular phase, with the story that passed through periods of transformation episodes, passed through periods of transformation episodes, it was not simply as in the traditional ever-renewing seasonal cycles, which is the way time was experienced in the different human societies generally.

Liturgies Based on Historical Realism

But when you get to the Passover festival, something profound took place. The experience of the Divine moved from being primarily in the cosmological order to being in the historical order. And our basic concern, our basic understanding, was in historical, religious sequence. With the Passover experience, the cosmological referent was replaced by the Divine referent as the primary consideration as concerns the patterns of ritual celebration. The presence of the Divine in cosmological time was transformed into the experience of the Divine in the historical role of liberation of Israel from the oppression of Egypt.

This sense of the historical realism was emphasized with the creation narrative where numbered time sequence was established providing a clarity that had never been known previously in the various creation narratives over the world. This time precision enabled the Gospel writers to provide a complete genealogical record for the birth of Christ.

Until this time, the creation narratives were mythic beginnings, not numbered in historical time. With Israel, when the record of Genesis was written, this was in a measurable historical time to this date, I believe it's some 5,000 years or more, but it's considered to be historically precise. This historical realism of the Western world is what gave the Western world its tremendous drive, its intensity of accomplishment. And once this was started, at the time of the Crusades, at the end of the 11th century, it never stopped. Europe went through 200 years of crusading, and then it went on into an expansive period in Europe and then on into the colonial period. And the colonial period has driven it on into the United Nations period and now into such phenomena as the World Trade Organization and to all that globalization that we witness at the present time. This all evolved out of this commitment to historical time. Now this historical realism was further emphasized by Saint John. In the biblical world, it's one of the things that's rather important as regards the Jesus presence. It was very important that it be given

historical time identity. That's why the birth of Jesus, the Nativity, is related to the several political events of the period, so there'd be no doubt about precisely when the birth of the Nativity took place.

And this further realization was carried on by Saint John in his first epistle, where he tells us, and I quote:

Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have shared and we have seen with our own eyes and we have watched and touched with our hands, the Word was life. This is our subject. That life was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony telling you the eternal life which was with the Father has grown visible to us. What we have seen and heard we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us as we are in union with the Father and his son Jesus (1 John 1:1-3)

Then there is the passage of Saint Paul as regards the resurrection to affirm the historical realism of that event. "Now if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised then you are still in your sins. If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). This way the universe begins to lose its comprehensive mythic context in favor of a particular rise in historical narrative. That's a very important sentence, I think, because we lost the universe at this time, in a sense. We gained historical precision in certain aspects of events, but in a sense, we lost that sense of the universe as our primary sacred liturgy. The primary sacred liturgies after this were limited in historical time in their origin.

This emphasis on historical realism was given a special emphasis by St. Augustine in his masterwork, *The City of God*. Another context was established in the Easter Vigil liturgy. At this time, a further emphasis on the realism of the Christian context was provided by association of the liturgy with the story of the universe as background for the recreation of the universe in Christ. This historical realism and commitment to religious salvation only through association with the historical narrative of the Gospels and the historical sequence of the redeemed community gave an even greater realism to the entire Christian process. This is all within the Ptolemaic context because there was human historical sequence against the background of a non-historical Earth sequence. The Ptolemaic Earth, the Ptolemaic heavens were there, and Ptolemaic, it was every renewing seasonal cycle, it was not historical until later, when the biblical historicism was extended into the universe by about 12 billion years.

So this is very important because this is why we have such little regard for the planet Earth. It's because we lost that sense of the sacred of the planet in the sense that it existed before. One of the first things that I read to you was the universe ritual, you might say. It was a whole universe that was a concern. Once the biblical world comes into being, then it becomes more limited because of the historicism. It's more realist in one way, but it's realism within a Ptolemaic context of a universe that is ever-renewing seasonal cycles. It's not a universe that's going through a series of episodes, of transformation episodes, whereby it's moving from one level of development to successive levels of development. But within this context, it was very powerfully historical.

And Dostoevsky had a profound sense of the universe as the ultimate context to Christian reference. This we see especially in a story entitled "The Condemned." When Raskolnikov confesses his guilt to Sonia, she tells him to go to the center of the city, kiss the Earth, and then face successively in the four directions, and declare, "I am a murderer."

From all of this, we might understand that the primary reference as regards reality of value and power was the universe in its full integrity. This was the absolute power that was indicated by Thomas of Aquinas when he indicated, and this is a quote from the *Summa Contra Gentilis*, Book II, Chapter 46, “The order of the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.” And also later he would say that “the entire universe of things participates in and manifests the Divine more than any single being” whatsoever.

The Secular Scientific Realm

Again, this gives us, preserves the universe in the Ptolemaic context, but not the universe that we are committed to with our scientific inquiry. And this is what I would call the scientific secular sequential time. This was non-repetitious, sequential development. Throughout this process the earlier emphasis on the primacy of the universe as a central referent for reality and value was being altered to a sequence of human historical references. Yet what might be considered a shock occurred when the existing Ptolemaic pattern of the universe as handed down from classical times was suddenly confronted with another way of seeing the universe and the place and role of the human within the universe. This event occurred with the discovery by Copernicus that the universe as presented by the traditional context of Western civilization was no longer valid. With Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton, the entire understanding of the universe was altered. The age of the universe and the Earth began to be revised. In this context, the human historical order was extended to the story of the entire universe as a self-emergent process passing through a sequence of irreversible transformation episodes moving from lesser to greater complexity of structure and from lesser to greater consciousness because the more complete the consciousness, the later in time. The sense of a Creator was dismissed. The universe in its fullness as a comprehensive self-shaping process was asserted.

In the last century, the human was an observer not included within the universe studied by scientific processes because all the research did not include the person doing the research. The person doing the research was outside of what he was studying. That is why it can be so easily to decide that there was no spiritual dimension, no soul dimension, because the observer was outside the universe as if looking through a one-way mirror. The universe being studied did not include the observer. Only later through the theories of relativity and quantum theory did the observer come back as an integral component of the universe being studied.

But even so, the universe became alienated from any sense of the sacred. The religious rituals continued to follow their earlier relation to the ever-renewing cosmology of earlier times. The universe as known by scientific inquiry was considered as the source of everything in the universe, but the celebrations of the sacred world were still associated with the cyclical world of earlier times, with the celebrations of various moments when certain historical events were recognized. And that’s why church services have no reference to an emergent, periodically transformed universe. The religious tradition has been unable to absorb the story of the universe as we know it now, and until they do, and that’s the basic idea of this paper I might say, until they do, we will never have adequate rapport with the universe as we now know it. And that world will continue to remain outside of the world of the sacred, whereas the earlier worlds were within the sacred world, but our understanding of them was not fully adequate.

A Second Exodus

What is needed is what might be called a “Second Exodus.” It is a very interesting term, a Second Exodus. The first Exodus, from Egypt to Palestine, from the secular to the sacred world, or from bondage

to liberation, was from Egypt to Palestine. So this was the first Exodus, but once a people is in the Holy Land, every Holy Land becomes a prison if a Second Exodus is not made back to Egypt. In other words, a sacred world that is gotten to by an exodus requires an exodus back because the Divine gifts granted are certainly not for just a segment of the human. And that was the role of Christianity a person might say, or part of the role of Christianity, is to move back to Egypt. To move out of the sacred world, out into the profane world. And this has been called by one author, Eric Voegelin, who's one of the most powerful historians of the 20th century. He uses the term "Second Exodus." It's a fascinating story.

But what I suggest is what Christianity needs is a Second Exodus because we have to move out of our sacred world out to the profane world if we are going to be integral with the real life that has evolved here on planet Earth. If we are going to be really integral with the human community. Because we now know that our sense of the historical world, and we are historically committed, our history though until recently, until now has been Ptolemaic, that is ever renewing seasonal cycles. But now there is a call to go beyond our own historical mode into a more comprehensive and deeper historical mode that a person could consider as a Second Exodus.

This return back into the natural world then out to the entire world must be a necessary continuation of the first Exodus. This was the role that was fulfilled by Christianity in the beginning but now Christianity is failing to make their own Second Exodus. That is our problem. That's the deepest problem of the 20th 21st century; it's the inability to bring an adequate interpretation to our new knowledge of the universe. But then Christianity, through the course of time, came to extend its own sense of the sacred throughout the world that it lived in. And Christianity did make its exodus out of Europe, out into the colonial worlds of the time, and out into the trans-European world. But mentally, it has never been able to make what I've suggested.

The world of contemporary science has taken command of the human mind in its understanding of the universe. The traditional sacred realm remains in the form of the Ptolemaic context. It keeps this intellectual context with little interaction with the world of contemporary research. Church teaching, parish preaching, the sacraments, the sacred calendar; these remain as they have been throughout the Christian centuries. The belief statements, these remain in their earlier terminologies, and so, too, the other sacred traditions continue their centuries-old manner of expression.

A Return to Cosmic Liturgies

While doctrinal statements of religious belief would involve new modes of understanding, it is the adoption of liturgies based on the universe story with its beginning some 14 billion years ago and its sequence of transforming episodes whereby the universe as we know it has come into existence that concerns me in this present discussion. One of the great differences in our present sequence of liturgies is these traditional liturgies have been adopted into the ever-renewing seasonal cycles. These will necessarily continue even while we move into celebration of the evolutionary transformation moments. These might find annual expression of one-time events just as the life story of Jesus narrates one-time events that are now celebrated in ever-renewing seasonal sequence.

Only when we begin to think of the emergent universe as a comprehensive realm of the sacred—right now it is the world of the profane, it is a world of use, it's a world of natural resources. It is not the world of the sacred. It is not the world of what I described, one of the three attributes of the sacred: wonder, beauty, intimacy. Until the human community and the planet Earth, particularly the planet Earth, takes on sacred dimensions, we will forever destroy it. And in the 21st century, I think that is one of the major

confrontations that has to be made: between the psychic or the spirit dimension of the human and the Earth relationship, so that we can withdraw from considering planet Earth simply as natural resource there for use. Right now, the planet Earth is seen as something there for human use, but if we consider it there for human use the Earth can tell us what individuals sometimes tell each other: "You used me. You used me." What does that mean? That means that you, while I am willing to care for you, to be devoted to you, to heal you, to clothe you, and so forth, I am willing to do all that, but don't use me in the sense of devastating the better things that I have to give you. I have better things to give you. I have love, I have beauty, I have wonder, I have all those intimacies that come with humans and their relationships with each other. I will give you flowers, I will give you gifts, I will give you just wonderful things, but the main thing I give you is presence. I give you my presence.

As soon as we begin to exploit another person of course we are in trouble, but it is also as regards the planet Earth. It's the same thing. The planet Earth tells us: "I will give you wonderful gifts. I will make the Divine present to you, only don't look at me as natural resource to be exploited, to be used." Whereas in our economics at the present time, if a thing is not used it is considered wasted. And so there is the great need to revere the world we live in because it's only one world. It is not two. It is not a human community and a community outside of the human. The Earth is a single community. It is participated in differently, but they're not two communities. And the great disaster I would say as regards the planet Earth and why in this century it is going to be a big stress, and there is a big conflict and a big struggle that is already in place of how to keep the Earth beautiful, how to keep it with some sense of reverence, how to keep humans from destroying it. And for what? For money, but sometimes for very inadequate use relationships.

So, continuing on into this, there is the, this is the third period, what's the fourth period? There's a fourth period. You have the first period of the universal liturgy; the second, the historical prophetic Ptolemaic liturgy; the third, the secular scientific world; and then the fourth. What's the fourth? And this is what our task is now, is to carry out a fourth liturgical transformation or cosmic ritual. That is, to bring this sense of the sacred into the picture so that we have a beautiful Earth, an Earth where humans and the trees and the birds and the rivers and the hills and the fish have a rapport with each other, can be present to each other.

When a person says, "present to each other," when I say that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not of objects to be exploited, what would I mean by that? What do we mean by communed with? "Communed" is something of a psychic order, of a spirit order, of a mind order, of a soul order. We can use any of these words: soul, mind, spirit, whatever. It is the capacity of two or more beings to occupy the same psychic space at the same time. Two physical objects can't be in the same psychic [physical] space at the same time but in the psychic, spirit, in the soul order, that is the essence of the capacity to be present to some other mode of being. You are present with knowledge when you see somebody. You have a trans-material capacity to see. It requires that the sense of form in the thing seen be brought into the one seeing, but it is a capacity for presence. This capacity for presence is what becomes most important. If you have for instance, if you have, say, music, you can listen to a symphony, but to be one person listening to a symphony is kind of ineffective. We can't really enjoy the symphony unless we have others with us, others to enjoy it, so that it is not something that a person can be by themselves and still get the full enjoyment. You have to have others. You have to have this communication.

What I am suggesting now for what is ahead of us is the establishment of a new series of celebrations that are taken from the transformation episodes in the making of the universe. So if a person were making festivals to be celebrated in the life of Jesus you would take the different episodes of his life and celebrate those: his birth, some of his ministry, and his death, and so forth. Here is what I would suggest as regards the new set of liturgies that we need to establish.

First, I would say that liturgies are celebrations of transition moments, like springtime. Springtime is a transition moment. We celebrate spring because it's a move from one stage of the planet to another. The trees were gone during the winter, and they come back. We celebrate spring. We celebrate the fall when there is a transition made from summer to winter and the fruit ripens. And the three great moments of a person's life we celebrate: birth, maturity, wedding, death. These are the transition moments, which are the sacred moments. And so with making this Second Exodus into this fourth time period, I would say, I would list these to be considered.

The first I would say we should celebrate is the first moment when the universe comes into being. It is a kind of a flaring forth of energy. But almost immediately when something acquires mass, there are three things that characterize the first structure is difference, differentiation happens, and creation is essentially differentiation; the second is inner articulation; and the third is bonding, everything is bonded. Everything is differentiated from other things. It's established in its own inner spontaneity, and then everything is joined together. That is the universal law of existence in the created order. That, I think, needs to be celebrated in the Christian world. This is the best analogy we have for the Trinity. We think of the Divine in these things. When we think of the Divine, we think in terms of differentiation, inner articulation, and bonding.

Now the second thing that I would suggest that we develop a liturgy for is the supernova out of which the solar system was fashioned. The early stars could not produce a solar system or a planet Earth or life or anything that we see on the planet Earth because it had only the lighter elements. They had only helium and hydrogen and some of the lesser elements. And then we have the other elements come later, but we needed a supernova. The supernova is a stage where the star goes into an inner collapse with enormous heat and then explodes. In the enormous heat, a first or second or third generation star exploded and in that explosion created the ninety-something elements. And the sun, which is a star, our sun absorbed these fragments that were scattered out into space and made the solar system with the nine planets. So the solar system comes by what could be considered a sacrificial moment of an early star. That, I think, should be celebrated.

Then the shaping of the Earth. The shaping of the Earth is very important because although all the planets were the same at the beginning, Mars turned to rock. Jupiter remained gaseous because its concentration of its interior, the radioactivity, was such that it remained gaseous. There is no surface such as the Earth or Mars. But only the Earth had the right distance from the sun, the right distance from the moon. If the Earth were closer to the moon, the tides would overwhelm the Earth, and if it were further away, there would be no tides. In either case there would be no life on Earth. So that the shaping of the Earth — the right distance from the sun, the right distance from the moon—is what made us possible, made intelligence possible. Made all these wonderful things possible.

Now the origin of life, the beginning of the first cell. I think all these things, a person could go and choose any number, but I think about ten or so stand out that could be celebrated. As soon as we begin to celebrate some of these things we begin to think about it [the Earth] as something other than

something to be exploited, something to be used, but something to be present to, a part of the integral life that we have.

Then we could go into photosynthesis, the first life form that could use the energy of the sun together with oxygen and other elements to create living plants. Then one of the most fascinating is the beginning of sexual reproduction. Originally life continued by dividing into two, and that way life would continue. But when it developed so that two principals were needed to come together to create life, evolution became possible. Without that, evolution would not have been possible, the whole display of life would not have been possible. And it was a sacred moment. I think it needs to be sacralized because of its enormous importance.

And then there are the flowers. Up until 100 million years ago, there were no flowers. There were only ferns. But then suddenly the flowers came, and the ferns were pushed back into the forests, into the marshes, and flowers took over. We needed flowers for us to be here because flowers produce seeds that carry the protein in a form that we can use.

Then there are a number of things that could be celebrated. Maternal affection. It is a very fascinating thing when maternal affection came into being. It would be in the dinosaur period most likely when eggs were laid and the eggs were hatched and then the young had to be tended to. Because it is maternal affection which is certainly one of the most magnificent of all Earth experiences and one of the great forms of the sacred.

Then sometimes I think of the animals. I think the wolf has a special role because we get the dog from the wolf, and the dog is such a wonderful presence for humans. Of all the animals, it seems to be one that is most a companion to the [human].

Well, there are other things that could be done. It's like with the nurturance and maternal affection, things like the Blessed Virgin and the Madonna figure were dependent on events such as that.

So these I would like to say are the four periods of what I would call liturgy or sacred periods in which the sacred expresses itself in a certain way. And with these four, I think a person could understand Western civilization. And in particular with thinking of the last and the first, I think our relationship with the planet Earth, with the natural world, is set into a context where we can understand and feel drawn to fulfill our obligations as regards the world about us. Because if we don't it could be very difficult, very strained, as the Earth deteriorates as it is not cared for. And I don't know how else it can be cared for with the affection, with the intimacy that is so necessary.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. How do you respond to the liturgies based on a universal presence to the natural world that Berry describes? Which ones move you and why?
2. What is your reaction to the idea that the universe is the Great Self of each individual self, and that each person has both an individual form and a comprehensive universe form? What does that mean for you?
3. How might communities of faith incorporate new rituals and celebrations into their way of life?
4. Berry describes natural phenomena—sunsets, migration of birds, changing seasons—as a kind of “cosmic liturgy.” How do you experience sacredness in the cycles of nature, and how might a conscious recognition of these cycles transform your understanding of time and presence?

5. Berry notes that contemporary science often excludes the observer and the sacred dimension. How could science and spirituality be integrated to foster a deeper appreciation of the universe as a living, sacred whole?
6. Berry suggests that humanity needs a “Second Exodus” back into the world of the sacred and the natural. What would a modern “Second Exodus” look like in your own life, your community, or globally?
7. Berry proposes new liturgies to celebrate major moments in the universe’s evolution (formation of Earth, origin of life, photosynthesis, sexual reproduction, flowers, maternal care). How could framing these events as sacred help cultivate a sense of reverence for life and evolutionary history?
8. Berry emphasizes that the Earth gives gifts of presence, beauty, and wonder, and warns against exploiting it. In practical terms, how might recognizing the sacredness of the planet influence personal and societal choices regarding environmental care and sustainability?

Journaling Prompts

1. Spend some time writing out your initial reactions to this talk. What moved you? Where did you find resistance? Which one or two quotes specifically struck you? Why?
2. Berry talks about the Earth offering gifts of presence rather than being “used.” Consider your daily interactions with nature, people, or even yourself. Where are you fully present, and where might you be “using” rather than communing? How can presence transform those relationships?
3. Berry encourages celebrating the milestones of the universe—from the first cell to maternal affection. Choose one event in Earth’s history or life’s evolution that resonates with you and explore why it feels sacred. How does acknowledging this event influence your relationship to life today?
4. Take a moment to reflect on yourself not as separate from the universe, but as part of it. What does it mean to occupy the same “psychic space” as the stars, the trees, the oceans? Can you describe this communion in a way that evokes awe or gratitude?

Meditation/Prayer Practice

Spend some time in quiet prayer and contemplation around one of the following:

- *You are the heart and mind of heaven and Earth.*
- *“I give you my presence.”*

Take a moment to write down any thoughts, questions, or new understandings that came to you.