

Theological Reflection: 12.02.25

Reverence in a Living World: *Hawaii, Ecological Theology, and the Practice of Sabbath*

Sabbath has always been, for me, a time to breathe deeply enough that the presence of God can catch up with me again. This recent time away in Hawaii—time of rest, renewal, and adventure—became something even more: a living classroom in ecological theology, an immersion in the truth Elizabeth Johnson keeps pointing us toward—that creation is not merely scenery, but a community of life in which God's Spirit pulses, sings, erupts, and dances.

Standing atop Mauna Kea under a midnight sky, I saw stars beyond imagination—so many that the darkness itself seemed embroidered with light. It felt like the universe was breathing, and I was breathing with it. In class we've been exploring the idea that creation is a communion rather than a collection of objects, an unfolding story in which humans are participants, not the pinnacle. Up there, looking across galaxies, I felt my own smallness not as insignificance, but as belonging. I remembered Johnson's reminder that awe is a doorway to wisdom. Sabbath, too, is a doorway—an invitation to stop striving long enough to remember who we are, and whose we are, in this vast community of life.

And then, almost in contradiction and yet profoundly connected, came the fire. At Kīlauea I witnessed lava fountaining 400 feet into the air—hot, red, alive. The earth was giving birth in real time. Theologians often speak of creation as ongoing, dynamic, unfinished. Watching molten rock rise and spill, I understood this with new clarity: God's creativity is not only in ancient beginnings but in every moment. The earth is not static; it is a living, evolving body, and we are part of its story. In the glow of that volcanic fire, I felt both the beauty and the fragility of our world, the fierce generosity of a planet that continually reshapes itself.

Hawaii revealed that generosity everywhere. Green sand beaches shimmering with minerals born from volcanic heat. Shorelines covered in sea turtles—so still at first I thought they were stones—until the stones began to breathe and move. In class we've talked about Johnson's claim that humans and other creatures share one "community of creation," formed of the same stardust, loved by the same God. Watching those turtles, ancient and unhurried, I felt that kinship in my bones.

I found it again in the crystal-clear waters where brightly colored fish darted between corals, and in the manta rays that turned somersaults through shafts of light, feeding delicately on plankton. I found it in the Gold Dust Day Geckos with their impossible greens, oranges and blues, and in the flowers whose colors and fragrances seemed to stretch the spectrum itself. Creation is extravagant. God is not frugal with beauty, pleasing to all the senses.

Even the black lava fields—mile after mile of what looked like ruin—whispered a truth we've been learning: that death and destruction in nature are not endpoints but part of the world's capacity to regenerate. Life returns. New species take root. The earth is always becoming. Resurrection is not only a story about one moment in history, but a rhythm inscribed in the planet itself.

And then the sky—how generous the Hawaiian sky is. Rainbows appearing as if on cue. Golden sunrises and brilliant orange sunsets that felt like hymns painted across the horizon. Watching these daily resurrections of light, I kept thinking of Johnson's insight that the glory of God fills not only the heavens but the earth, and that to love God is to love the world God has made.

Even the human expressions of spirit became part of this living liturgy: hula dancers whose bodies carried stories older than language, fire-knife dancers reminding me that ritual flame has always been a way humans honor the sacred, waterfalls descending like baptismal grace into deep pools. Everywhere, creation was praising in its own voice.

And I realized: I was not simply observing; I was participating. Sabbath gave me the time and the heart-space to remember that connection. It is one thing to study ecological theology in the virtual classroom; it is another to feel it move through you when you stand on a mountain or beneath a volcano or in the quiet of a tidepool.

This trip renewed in me a deep sense of responsibility—the conviction that awe must lead to care. When we truly see the world as sacred, as alive with God, we cannot help but desire its flourishing. As Elizabeth Johnson writes, we are not rulers over creation but kin among kin, entrusted with its well-being because our lives are intertwined.

Hawaii reminded me that the world is shimmering with God, that beauty is a form of revelation, and that sabbath is not escape but an invitation to rejoin creation with reverence. I returned grateful—grateful for the renewal, grateful for the wisdom learned not only from books but from lava, turtles, stars, and rainbows.

And grateful for a God whose love is written in oceans and fire, in creatures great and small, in color and fragrance, in dances and waterfalls, and in every breath of this living, holy world.