

Tree of Life Church  
September 1, 2024—Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Season of Creation

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The words by Albert Laszlo Barabisi, alongside this relief, say, Here is a secret that never makes the headlines:  
we have taken apart the universe and have no idea how to put it back together.

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**FIRST LESSON**

Psalm 42 (read responsively)

One: As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

**All: My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?**

One: My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

**All: These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.**

One: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

**All: My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.**

One: Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your torrents; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

**All: By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.**

One: I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

**All: As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"**

One: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,

**All: As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever, Amen.**

## **SECOND LESSON                  Romans 8:18-25**

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 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 enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, 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. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

## SERMON

### Season of Creation Rev. M. Courtenay Willcox

I'm very excited to be kicking off our fall season with a five-part sermon series on The Season of Creation. Today, I will spend time framing the program, and then we can look ahead to four sermons focused in Mark, where the Word is the impulse that summons forth creation, evokes praise from creation, and stirs life in creation. But, why should we spend time looking at creation stories in scripture and thinking about our triune God as Creator? Because these stories of creation are everywhere in scripture.

This Season of Creation is a liturgical season that churches all over the world celebrate. It began 24 years ago, in 2000, in the Lutheran Church in Australia by a Biblical studies professor who realized that while most of the liturgical year celebrates the life of Jesus, there was no part of the year that focused on God as Creator. Each September offers themes for study and consideration, and the theme for 2024 is: To Hope and Act with Creation: The First Fruits of Hope. This is based on our Romans scripture today, the first fruits of hope. This annual Christian celebration offers an opportunity for us pray and respond together to the cry of creation. Our ecumenical family around the world unites, especially during this season, as a reminder to listen to and care for our common home.

Larry Rasmussen, recognized as a foremost Christian environmental ethicist, explains the thinking behind this Season of Creation. Among the seasons of the church year, organized around the life of Jesus; none is in recognition of God as Creator. This is among the reasons for a Season of Creation, but there are more; one has to do with how people care for Creation, and the other has to do with how Creation informs us, our relationship with one another, with our natural world, and with God. Why a Season of Creation?

The first has to do with the importance of caring for God's creation, the centrality of Earth care as our original human vocation, and the bond between humans and Earth. Theologically and scripturally, we are created from earth and are called to serve the earth, from dust we have come and to dust we will return.

The second creation account in Genesis tells us that the human, *adam*, was created from the earth, the *adamah*. It is clear in translation, that God did not first create man, but God made a mud-baby, a dirt-person, a dust-creature. In Genesis 2:15 the human is given the vocation to serve and protect the earth, to till and care for, serve and preserve. While, in the first creation account, humans are granted dominion over the earth, Jesus reminds us that those who rule are to serve (Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 9:33-35; Luke 22:25-26). Today, it is science, for some, that has assumed a prophetic role and has led to a witness that is far from serving and preserving Creation. Humans are disrupting and threatening Earth and all that lives on it—from climate change to mass

extinctions. The human impact on God's good creation is far from benign, so building more awareness of God as Creator into our Christian worship awakens us not to doom but to our vocation, our call, as stewards of creation.

The second reason to remember this season, relates to the Bible as nature literature. Our scripture is set in an agrarian culture and was written by people with an intimate relationship to the natural world. Again and again, the words we use on Sunday, the words that are so familiar to us, the words that provide us comfort and succor, use nature in metaphors, similes, and examples. Nature as metaphor is seen in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, He restores my soul....

The 41<sup>st</sup> Psalm provides a wonderful simile: As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

The parables of Jesus are filled with images from nature; familiar to us is the parable of the sower, (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8), and there are other examples, too. Jesus' use of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field as recipients of God's care. Jesus weaves the natural world into what he says again and again: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58)

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37)

Offering this time in our church year to remember God as Creator provides us with an opportunity to build a deeper awareness of the natural world so that we can do two things, more fully appreciate Biblical literature and look into the importance of caring for creation. In the coming weeks, we will also dive into more scripture tied to creation care. Typically, four readings are assigned to each Sunday in our common lectionary: one from the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the Gospels, and one from the New Testament letters. Every Sunday, I select two readings. For the next four Sundays, we will hear all four readings because they are tied to creation care. I don't think even I realized all the scripture dedicated to our natural world.

Today, we look at Romans as our lynchpin scripture.

In these few verses from Romans, Paul pulls together the Hebrew scriptural promise of a new heaven and new earth from Isaiah, and the Genesis 2 creation story where the *adam* is birthed through divine CPR and is what God creates to tend the earth. In return, creation tends to the *'ādām*. Most commentaries give more agency to *'ādām*,

the creature, than to creation. Even in Romans, the earth is the recipient, to its great detriment, of the actions and misbehavior of a humanity that misses the mark, focusing on things of this world rather than on God. In today's scripture, liberation from bondage, release to glorious times, and freedom from the slavery of decay are just some of the phraseology different translations use as they point to what is to come.

Scripturally, our discord with the earth begins early on, when Adam and Eve leave the garden and venture into the world. *Isha* and *ish* suffer consequences from eating the forbidden fruit, pain in childbirth for Eve and enmity with the land for Adam. It is important to note that, sin, which **so many** place on the act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, does not enter the text until Cain kills Abel. God favors Abel and sin crouches at Cain's door. God rejects the gifts of the harvest, and Abel's blood cries out from the earth. In this story, the earth has agency and voice. We have silenced and stripped creation of its voice. Creation, humankind, and fecundity are fraught with hostility for one another. The created order is "out of joint."

N. T. Wright contends that this reflection in Romans, is seen as humankind peering into the mirror of creation, and having a clear image of rebellion against God, who is peering back. Humankind rebels, earth suffers, but Paul promises in these words from Romans that the earth will be sprung from her suffering, redemption is in sight not only for humankind but for the earth that has suffered indignity upon indignity at the hands of the creature with dominion. Wright says,

"Humans continued to abuse their environment, so that one of the reasons why God sent Israel into exile, according to the Scriptures, was so that the land could at last enjoy its Sabbaths (Lev 26:34-43 [cf. 25:2-5]; 2 Chr 36:21)." And did we not, I believe, experience an earth Sabbath in the early days of the COVID pandemic, when travel was curtailed, people no longer commuted to work, and the earth had a chance to breath. Wright continues, "But the answer to the problem was not (as in some New Age theories) that humans should keep their hands off creation, should perhaps be removed from the planet altogether so as not to spoil it any further. The answer, if the creator is to be true to the original purpose, is for humans to be redeemed, to take their place at last as God's image bearers, the wise steward they were always meant to be."<sup>1</sup>

Wise stewards is a high bar as we face a conundrum of dualism and moral misdirection. No one is listening to the voice and personhood of creation. In 1993, more than 25 years ago, Wendell Berry wrote about humankind's consideration of creation and about the Greco-Roman binaries under which we still operate,

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," pages 395-770 in Vol. 10 of The New Interpreter's Bible. Ed. Leander E. Keck. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p 596.

The crucial test is probably Genesis 2:7, which gives the process by which Adam was created: "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul." My mind, like most people's, has been deeply influenced by dualism, and I can see how dualistic minds deal with this verse. They conclude that the formula for [human] man-making is: [human] ~~man~~ = body + soul. But that conclusion cannot be derived, except by violence, from Genesis 2:7, which is not dualistic. The formula given in Genesis is not [human] ~~man~~ = body + soul; the formula there is soul = dust + breath. According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed [adam] ~~man~~ of dust; by breathing his breath into it, he made the dust live. Insofar as it lived, it was a soul. The dust, formed as [adam] ~~man~~ and made to live, did not embody a soul; it became a soul. "Soul" here refers to the whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together, but as a single mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Berry sees humankind as a part of the holy communion of Creation. It is *through* his interpretation of scripture that he recognizes this connection with creation. It is just as easy to ignore our "at-one-ment of that membership." Berry understands that with this dualistic view (things are either one or another, black and white, good and bad, light and dark, happy and sad...you get the idea) there is a predictable result, that humankind will appreciate only the spiritual or mental Creation component and disassociate the physical or natural part our earth home. Although not new ideas, this is a paradigm shift in our thinking.

We will explore the concept that the Creation is not, in any sense, independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, ***but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.*** Creation is God's presence in creatures. To every creature the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God.

Sadly, rather than seeing holiness in raindrops, we just see a lot of rain, so what can we do with our normal detachment from creation? Now is the time to act, and not just by changing out lightbulbs, or drinking fair-trade coffee, or leaving our church bags in the car when we go shopping. We need to engage in significant actions, to hear about climate disruptions on a regular basis from the pulpit, to invest in a clean energy provider for the church's electricity, to share environmental advocacy with the

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, Christianity and the Survival of Creation, Cross Currents, Summer93, Vol. 43 Issue 2, p 149, 15p, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/berry.htm>.

congregation and the community, and to lobby elected officials to change laws to protect rather than desecrate the environment.

Let me show you my birthday project. Covering the grass with cardboard, mulch, and wood chips, planting native plants, Joe pye weed, bee balm, hairy beardtongue, blazing star, black-eyed susan, little bluestem, and goldenrod, gracie and protecting from the deer until they are established.

Climate change is a moral problem, not a technological one. We have the knowledge to solve the problem, but we lack the moral courage. Faith traditions have the moral authority, based on long-held religious beliefs, to speak out and lead communities to take action toward healing the climate. Because the voices of faith carry weight in a community, people of faith need to make some noise outside the doors of churches, mosques, and synagogues. When holiness is assigned exclusively to the church, the holiness of the rest of creation is denied. We need to see the holiness in creation, shake people awake, and bring them out of their lethargy. We need to offer hope, the same hope that Paul sought to give the Romans when he promised them that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the same freedom as of the children of God. (Rom. 8:21)

Here's what we know going into this Season, creation stories are everywhere in our scriptures, God wants a relationship with us and with creation, we, too, want a relationship with God and with what God creates. Let's celebrate and step into God's creation with a reverence and excitement for its care. Amen.