

# **It Does Not Have to Be This Way!**

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It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon more than twenty years ago, specifically, April 28, 1986. My family and I were living in Germany at the time because of a research leave, and we decided to spend some hours exploring the Harz Mountains, a range of hills right along what used to be the border between East and West Germany. The snow had melted, the earth was turning green again and the warmth of the sun as well as a gentle breeze refreshed our bodies and spirits as we enjoyed the beauties of nature. After returning home and eating our supper, we turned on the television. Our ideal day was suddenly turned upside down. The television stations were all reporting the news story of the day. Workers in a nuclear power facility in Sweden had entered the plant to begin their shift when the alarms starting sounding. Of course, they assumed that some kind of problem, most likely a leak, had occurred. However, after checking the whole plant they could find nothing wrong. What, then, had triggered the alarms? After further investigation it became apparent that the workers coming into the plant had such high radiation levels that they set off the alarms. The rest of the world thus became aware of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. For whatever reasons, the Soviet Union had delayed reporting this tragedy, which had occurred a few days earlier. A huge nuclear cloud had, therefore, drifted northwest from the general area of Kiev, across Poland, the Baltic countries and into Scandinavia. Hence, the radiation levels outside the power plant in Sweden were actually higher than they were inside the plant. During the next few days, more and more information became public regarding the magnitude of the disaster. In Poland, little children were being treated with iodine in order to counteract the potential effects of radioactive iodine from the nuclear pollution that had swept across the country. By mid-week the meteorologists in Germany were warning that the weather patterns were changing and that the winds would be blowing from the northeast. Thus nuclear contamination would also likely reach Western Europe. My wife and I had to make a decision. Should we simply stay and hope for the best or should we return home? Our children were still quite young at that time, and I had, in fact, completed my research project. Thus we decided to return to the United States. We are not sure, of course, how much pollution had already made its way into Germany by the time that we left, although the weather and news reports indicated later that the highest levels of contamination were actually measured in southern Germany and Austria rather than in the north where we had been living. That was good news for us, and, of course, we had an option to leave. The vast majority of Europeans obviously remained because they could not or did not wish to leave their homes. Government officials assured people in the West that there was little to worry about if they were simply careful, did not allow their children to play outside for extended periods of time, washed carefully after coming inside and chose not to eat fresh fruits and vegetables for some time. However, as the years passed, those same officials admitted that the pollution levels were actually higher than they had reported and that the health effects of this disaster would only become apparent over time.

It was this event, about which we hear very little now but which still causes substantial suffering, especially in the Ukraine, that made me and my family keenly aware of the forces of pollution that we humans have released, forces which profoundly impact our earth and all living things on

this wondrous planet. We have sought to be ecologically conscious since then and have been supportive of efforts to curb pollution and to care for the earth. Nuclear accidents, nuclear waste, the destruction of the ozone layer, the disappearance of glaciers throughout the world, the melting of the polar caps, the decimation of the rain forests, the warming of the oceans, the loss of evergreens throughout the western United States and Canada and contaminated fresh water sources such as the Great Lakes are just a partial list of the effects of pollution throughout the world. That is the bad news which some still deny but which is, in fact, undeniable. The evidence is simply overwhelming. However, there is also good news, namely, that it does not have to be this way. It does not have to be this way, my sisters and brothers, because of who God is and what God has done and, therefore, because of who we can be and what we can do.

As people of faith we confess confidently that God is creator. The whole universe and specifically the earth, our home, is God's handiwork. We have not made it, and it is not our possession, to do with as we please. Rather, it belongs to God who addresses our physical needs and sustains our life through water, land and air and all the good gifts these produce. Human beings, who so often view themselves as distinct from the material world, are, in fact, part of that world, dependent on it and symbiotically connected with it. Humans do not rule it, although God has given them a unique stewardship of the earth. While they benefit from it, they are, in turn, created to care for it. All of this is not only necessary; it is very, very good. And that is precisely God's opinion of the creation. God has pronounced it to be good, and God finds pleasure in it. At least, that is what God's wants it to be and what God desires.

The fact is, however, that this wondrous creation, which God declared to be good, has been profoundly impacted by the reality of human brokenness or sin. Ironically and tragically, humans were not satisfied to be God's good creation. Rather than letting God be God, they sought to be god. As a result, they became victims of their own self-centeredness, their perceived needs, their passion to satiate those needs. They locate themselves at the very center of the universe and view themselves as the rulers, the rightful users, the beneficiaries of all that the creation has to offer. The persistent exploitation, careless abuse and insatiable consumption of the earth's precious resources are all concrete manifestations of the compromise of God's good creation that has resulted from humanity's rebellion against God and against God's will for all that God has created.

But it doesn't have to be this way, because God decided not to abandon God's creation or to destroy that which humans have polluted, both spiritually and physically. What God had pronounced good remained precious in God's sight, and God deeply loved what God had made. Hence, rather than cursing and rejecting human beings and the rest of creation, God entered our world, took on flesh, and thus united the divine and the material in a radical, personal union. The Creator and the creation are still not one and the same, but in the Incarnate One they are united, and the finite now contains or becomes a vehicle of the divine. In Christ, the Creator also becomes the Redeemer, and surprisingly, foolishly, divinely, God uses flesh, created matter, to accomplish God's redemptive work. Christ is thus our guarantee that things do not have to be this way.

But more needs to be said, dear people of God. We have to get personal. In order to benefit from Christ's saving acts, all that he has won for us must become ours, not only corporately but also individually. The possibilities that God sets before us must somehow become realities. Faith is, therefore, necessary, for through the gift of faith the divine-human relationship is restored, sin is forgiven and a new life of loving service is inspired. And God's love affair with the creation continues, for God creates and nurtures faith through the Word, both the living, proclaimed word and the sacramental, the material word. The word of promise is thus united with water, and the water, a precious gift of creation, becomes life-giving water which washes away the punishment of sin and through which we are literally reborn. The word of promise accompanies a piece of bread and a sip of wine and human spirits are lifted; brokenness is healed; Christ enters his people, unites Himself with them and transforms them. Because they are one with Him, they are also united with one another and with the whole creation. The finite once again holds the infinite and becomes the vehicle of the divine. Common, yet precious, gifts of creation—water, bread, wine—accompanied by the living and effective word of God become means of grace through which God enlivens us to be God's people and God's instruments of life in the world.

In the Gospel lesson for the fifth Sunday after Easter, Philip, as the spokesperson of the disciples, asks Jesus to reveal Abba. In response, Jesus reminds Philip and his other friends that they do see Abba whenever they encounter Jesus. As people of faith, as the contemporary disciples of Jesus, we affirm Jesus' words and confess that he is, indeed, God's ultimate self-revelation. Thus we look to him in order to recognize God's essence, to see God at work and to be assured of God's intentions toward us and the whole creation. In Christ we note that God is not only the Creator but also the One who has chosen to unite with creation, to take on flesh, to enter human history. As the Christ God commands us to take water and to baptize in God's name. As the Christ God invites us to the divine banquet where we are nurtured with Christ's body and blood. In Christ we see God at work, creating, redeeming and granting new life in and through earthly things, the good gifts of creation. That is precisely why things do not have to be this way!