

# Living Faithfully in the Cosmos: Environmental Reflections for Disciples of Christ

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Certain facts are surely beyond dispute. John the Revelator had no degree in environmental biology. Paul the Apostle trudged up and down the roads of the Roman Empire planting churches and not apple trees. John the Gospel Writer, for his part, had no concept of global warming or the hole in the ozone layer. What is more, the New Testament writers were not even intending to publish 1st-century science manuals but rather to tell stories about Jesus and write letters of encouragement to struggling young churches. And yet the New Testament writers have much to teach us about the world, the cosmos, that we live in, where it came from, who sustains it, and where it is going. These writers also have much to tell us about what it means to live in our cosmos as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

We have been here together this weekend at a “visioning retreat” focused on “Creation and the Environment.” The issues in focus this weekend and this morning lie on two ends of the spectrum: On the one hand there is the question of “rootedness,” where we have come from, how we are rooted in this world that we know, and what it means to be grounded in God. On the other hand are questions of the “future,” the road ahead, the destination we look towards, and how to discern God’s call to an ongoing life of environmental faithfulness as we move down the road. These large questions about ultimate realities, about beginnings and endings, are questions that the New Testament writers speak to in all kinds of significant ways.

This morning I want to lift out four prominent New Testament motifs for brief consideration as we think about “Creation and the Environment” and as we ponder questions of “rootedness” and “future.” These motifs are “Creation,” “Incarnation,” “Devastation,” and “Re-creation.” These four motifs speak significantly of the cosmos, the natural world all around us. But at the same time and even more importantly they speak of the story of salvation, of God’s ultimate and saving purposes for God’s entire creation. And perhaps this very observation is the most significant one that we can make here this morning. What the New Testament writers say about the cosmos, the natural world, is profoundly connected to the “good news” of salvation and the message of God’s saving purposes for all of God’s creation.

**Creation.** Let’s take a look, then, at these environmental motifs. The first of these, in every sense of the word, is “Creation.” There is no more foundational motif within the New Testament writings. This is truly the ground out of which everything else grows. Jesus himself and the early followers of Jesus boldly and persistently confess that the God of the Scriptures and the God of their worship is the Creator who brought into being all that exists. Jesus prays to God as “Father,

Lord of heaven and earth” (Mt. 11:25) and speaks of “the beginning of creation” when “God made [humankind] male and female” (Mk. 10:6). The early followers of Jesus call on God as “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them” (Acts 4:24). To the Roman believers Paul describes God as the “Creator . . . whose eternal power and divine nature have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom. 1:20, 25). To the Corinthians Paul speaks of “the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’” (2 Cor. 4:6). The writer to the Hebrews depicts the God “for whom and through whom all things exist” (Heb. 2:10). James tells us that God “gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (Jas. 1:18). In 2 Peter we read that “by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water” (2 Pet. 3:5). And the twenty-four elders gathered around God’s throne in the vision of John the Revelator sing a hymn of praise to God the Creator: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:24).

God is the source of all life. A more basic confession of faith, and a more Jewish confession of faith, does not exist. But this is not all. There is one thing more. If the New Testament writers in good Jewish fashion proclaim God as Creator, they make a stunning new declaration as well. And this declaration lies at the heart of the “good news” that they proclaim. The God who has created all things has done so precisely through the agency of Jesus, Son of God and the Messiah/Christ of Jewish expectations. Paul tells the Corinthians that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). To the Colossians Paul speaks of Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16). The writer to the Hebrews depicts Christ as God’s “Son . . . through whom God also created the worlds” (Heb. 1:2). John the Gospel Writer speaks of the “Word” who was “in the beginning with God” and through whom “all things came into being” (John 1:2-3). And John the Revelator proclaims Christ as “the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev. 3:14, footnote).

This is powerful language. These are amazing truths. But what does all this “Creation” language mean for us? What difference does it make that we confess God as Creator and Christ as Agent of Creation? What is the call to us in this word of “Creation”?

**First and perhaps most basic, as children of the Creator God our call is to acknowledge God’s good creation as a gift to humankind and to partake of God’s provisions and God’s sustenance with gratitude and joy to the glory of God.** As Paul writes to the Corinthian believers, who have questions about eating meat offered to idols, he has very simple advice for them: Not to worry! “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for ‘the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s’” (1 Cor. 10:25-26). And Paul goes on to ask, “If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks? (1 Cor. 10:30). In other words Paul is saying, “All the bounty of the earth belongs to God. It is God’s good gift to you to meet your needs. Receive this gift with joy and thanksgiving.” And he concludes, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do

everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Creation is God’s good gift for us to enjoy; and when we enjoy it with gratitude, we bring glory to God.

Elsewhere Paul underscores this same idea in writing to the Colossian Christians. Some of them were evidently focused on a highly ascetic life, following strict guidelines concerning food and religious practices. To these believers Paul writes, “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. . . . If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’?” (Col. 2:16, 17, 20-21). Here again Paul seems to make it clear that the beauties of the natural world and the sustenance that God provides through the natural world are not things to be neglected or rejected, but rather to be touched, tasted, and handled with confidence and joy as good and nourishing gifts of the God in whom “all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col. 1:16).

Celebration of God’s good creation is the first call to action. And there are numerous accounts in the New Testament of just such celebration. Take, for example, the story that Jesus told about the father overjoyed by the return of his long-lost son: “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate!” (Lk. 15:22-23). Jesus was very fond of table celebration, so much so that he even acquired a reputation, rightly or wrongly, as a “glutton” and a “drunkard” (Mt. 11:19//Lk. 7:34). Jesus celebrated at table with Pharisees (Lk. 7:36-50), with tax collectors and “sinners” (Mk. 2:13-17//Mt. 9:9-13//Lk. 5:27-32), and with his own disciples (Mk. 14:12-25//Mt. 26:17-29//Lk. 22:7-38). And he points his followers to that time in the future when “many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8:11//Lk. 13:29).

But this is not all. Our call is not simply to receive God’s good gifts for our own nourishment and enjoyment. **As children of the Creator God our call is likewise to share God’s good creation with others and to take bold action to mediate God’s creation blessings to those who have need of them.** When Jesus is called to task by the religious authorities for healing a paralyzed man on the sabbath, he offers a striking defense of his actions: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (John 5:17). In other words Jesus claims the authority of God, his Creator Father. *God is still engaged in the work of creation.* And because God is still busy with creation activities, bringing life and healing to those who are sick and suffering, *so also is Jesus, God’s faithful Son.*

And Jesus in turn passes this very same commission on to his followers. When Jesus’ disciples ask him about the blind man and the cause of his blindness, Jesus announces: “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:4-5). It is not only *Jesus* who is called to continue God’s work of creation. It is *Jesus’ disciples* as well. The Creator God who called light into existence now shines that light into the world through the creative works of Jesus and his disciples. *And this means us.* Jesus calls us to be collaborators together with him in God’s creative work of bringing life and healing to humankind. The early believers in Jerusalem clearly

understand this. Listen to their words as they pray to God for boldness in the face of hostile powers: “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them . . . grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:25, 29-30). To be children of the Creator God and servants of the Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth is ultimately to participate with God in God’s ongoing works of redemption and healing carried out through the power of God and in the name of God’s “holy servant” Jesus. This is a high calling. But it is the calling that comes with our confession of faith in the God who has created all things.

**Incarnation.** A second environmental theme that we find in the New Testament is that of “Incarnation.” This theme lies at the heart of our faith in Jesus Christ. It is, ultimately, what defines our faith as *Christian* faith. And it has profound significance for us as children of God and brothers, sisters, and disciples of Jesus Christ. To speak about “incarnation” is to speak not of the God who created the world, or even of the Christ through whom all things came into being, as powerful as those concepts may be. To speak of “incarnation” is to confess that God has come to be one *among us*, that God has in fact come to be one *of us*, that the Creator God has stepped into God’s own creation, walked on earth *in human form* as a part of the *human family*. In his letter to the Christians of Philippi Paul makes use of an early Christian hymn that celebrates the “Incarnation”: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil. 2:5-7). And for John the Gospel Writer the “Word” who was “in the beginning with God” and through whom “all things came into being” (Jn. 1:2, 3) is the same “Word” who “became flesh” and “pitched his tent among us” in order to “make God known” to us (John 1:14, 18).

This “Incarnation” language speaks to us of God’s downward motion in moving into our world and taking on our flesh. “In an extraordinary act of divine solidarity and downward mobility, God has come to live among humankind as a mortal human being.”<sup>1</sup> This is something that we can receive only as gift. There is nothing we can “do” to bring about God’s “Incarnation” into our world. God comes to us as sheer gift in the person of Jesus Christ, a gift that we can only receive with thankfulness and confess with joy.

But there is another side to this language of “Incarnation.” “Incarnation” does not simply refer to the *downward* movement of God into our *human* reality. It also points to an *upward* movement, “the capacity of *earthly* substances to mediate the presence of the *divine*.”<sup>2</sup> John points us to this reality throughout his Gospel. “This becomes evident in the ‘signs’ that Jesus performs. Ordinary earthly substances take on extraordinary qualities at Jesus’ initiative. Water is transformed into wine (2:1-11); five barley loaves and two fish become a feast for five thousand people (6:1-15); a turbulent sea provides stable footing for Jesus to walk to his disciples in their boat (6:16-25); mud from the ground becomes the healing ointment for the eyes of a blind man (9:1-7); and a previously barren sea [instantly] yields up 153 fish (21:1-14). In John’s Gospel material reality—the everyday stuff of life—becomes a window through which [we] catch recurring glimpses of the glory of God.”<sup>3</sup>

And this has huge significance for us and for how we live our lives. Earthly substances, the stuff of our lives, is that which God chooses to use to reflect God's own glory and to meet the urgent needs of humankind. God's good creation, the tangible gifts of the Creator, the world we have at our fingertips, is the stuff of divine presence in our world, the means for mediating God's grace to all those who need it. **This then is our calling, to mediate the grace of God to humankind as the stuff of life passes through our hands to others.**

Perhaps the single most vivid New Testament portrait of what this calling means is the story told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke about Jesus feeding the crowds with bread and fish (Mk. 6:30-44//Mt. 14:13-21//Lk. 9:10-17). Here Jesus transforms his disciples visibly and tangibly into mediators of the grace of God. In the face of overwhelming need and the most meager of supplies, Jesus takes five loaves of bread, blesses them, and gives the loaves to his disciples, *so that they can feed the hungry multitudes*. The power does not belong to the disciples. They do not multiply the loaves of bread. But the gifts of God, the tangible earthly stuff of life, passes through their hands on its way to meeting the needs of a hungry humanity.

Who knows whether Paul is acquainted with this story. But in his letter to the Corinthians he speaks in other words of this same reality: "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. . . . He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God" (2 Cor. 9:8, 10-12).

And Jesus pronounces ultimate blessing on those who mediate the grace of God through their use of the gifts of God: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt. 25:34b-36). "Incarnation," God's entry into the world of human existence and God's presence in the stuff of everyday life, is a gift beyond all others, the gift of "God with us." And the God who comes to be with us and touches our physical world with grace calls us to offer that grace to all who have need through the stuff of life that passes through our hands.

**Devastation.** The word of "Incarnation" is a profound word of grace spoken into our cosmos. But not all is well in God's creation. The third environmental motif that we must look at here this morning is a word that we know only too well, the word "Devastation." The New Testament writers are not 21 st-century scientists with laboratory instruments capable of measuring the size of earthquakes or the strength of hurricane winds. Nor do they live with the massive degradation of the human environment that the 21 st-century global village has brought on itself as a result of worldwide industrial pollution, nuclear waste, and other such human-created disasters. But the New Testament writers recognize with a sure theological instinct that the created world is not yet a fully redeemed world. And they point with deep conviction to the present brokenness of the cosmos, the real world in which they live their lives. In his letter to the Roman believers Paul

speaks of the creation as “subjected to futility” and caught in the snare of “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:20, 21). And Paul concludes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom. 8:22).

What is perhaps most striking here is that Paul links human grief and pain, the present day and real world “sufferings” of the Christian believers, to the destiny of the cosmos itself. Just as the Roman believers “suffer” in the precarious world of human existence, so the cosmos itself is subject to “futility” and “bondage” and “groaning.” And as Paul sees it the redemption of humankind and the redemption of the cosmos are profoundly connected to each other: “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 bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-21). Whatever Paul understands scientifically about the world, Paul knows that the destiny of humankind and the destiny of the cosmos are inseparably linked and that they both are waiting for deliverance and ultimate redemption.

John the Revelator knows the very same thing. He hardly intends to write a scientific treatise on the status of the natural world. But intentions or no, John the Revelator offers us an astonishing portrait of the “devastation” of creation, a portrait that needs almost no interpretation to be readily understood in our present 21 st-century world. “[In Revelation] John offers [us] a panoramic scene of catastrophic cosmic breakdown that encompasses every element of the created order . . . . On the human level there is war and human slaughter (6:1-2, 3-4, 7-8, 9-11), along with steep inflation affecting basic commodities (6:5-6). People suffer from “foul and painful sores” (16:2) and “every kind of plague” (11:6). They experience drought (11:6), “flood” ( 12:15), the “fierce” and “scorching” heat of the sun (16:8-9), and “dried up” rivers ( 16:12). They die from “famine” (6:7-8; 18:8), “pestilence” (6:7-8; 18:8), “wild animals” (6:7-8), and water polluted by “wormwood” ( 8:10-11). Smoke “like the smoke of a great furnace” ascends and “darkens the sun and the air” with its pollution (9:2). Earthquakes “split cities” ( 16:18), cause them to “fall” ( 11:13), and decimate their populations ( 11:13).”<sup>4</sup> It reads just like an environmental report on the Evening News.

But what is even more astonishing about John’s dismal environmental report is the cause of it all. All of these horrific events happening on the earth, as John sees it, are the result of human sinfulness. In John’s words, “The harvest of the earth is fully ripe”; and it must therefore be “reaped” (Rev. 14:15, 16). Elsewhere John announces that “the time [has come] . . . for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). John may have no 21 st-century explanations of the scientific cause and effect of human sinfulness and the degradation of the earth. But his theological instinct is right on target. The root cause of this sinfulness, as John sees it, lies in the failure of humans to recognize God as Creator. Instead they “worship demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood which cannot see or hear or walk” ( 9:20). And sinfulness that begins by rejecting God the Creator ends up in luxurious living, the misuse of God’s good gifts (18:3, 7, 9), and in deadly violence against human beings (16:6; 18:24), the creatures God has created.

What does all this mean for us? What is the call to us in these vivid portraits of the “devastation” of creation? Paul, for his part, calls the believers to a stance both of “lament” and “anticipation” in the face of present “sufferings.” As Paul puts it, “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23). Redemption for ourselves and for our cosmos lies somewhere down the road in God’s good time. But in the present moment we live with the grief and the pain of present suffering both in our lives and in the life of the world that we know. Who could contradict Paul’s words in our world of mega-tsunamis, massive earthquakes, and monster hurricanes? In the face of all these things Paul invites us to genuine lament, even as we place our hope in God’s ultimate redemption of us and our world.

John the Revelator, for his part, pushes us one step farther. The call of John’s apocalypse in light of the “devastation” of creation is the call to “repent” (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19; 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11) and to “give God glory” (16:9). And here is where our calling lies and where our work begins as we face the unimaginable devastation of our present world. John cannot help us with the 21 st-century specifics of our task. But once again his 1 st-century theological instinct is “bang on.” **The dual call to “repent” and to “give God glory” is powerful agenda for our response to the mess that we have made of God’s creation.**

**Re-creation.** But there is one thing more, the final word. And that word is “Re-creation.” “Devastation” is not the last word. God will one day redeem creation. Cosmic destruction is by no means the end of God’s story. Of this the New Testament writers are absolutely convinced. Beyond death lies resurrection. And beyond devastation lies God’s re-creation of a cosmos mangled and abused by human sinfulness. And here again, as with “Creation,” the role of Christ is crucial. Christ, who was the Agent of Creation now becomes the Agent of Re-creation. Paul talks about Christ as the “last Adam,” the “second man,” and the “man of heaven” in contrast to Adam, who was the “first man,” the “man from the earth” and the “man of dust” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45-49). And what this means for us and for all creation is that everything that Adam got wrong because of his “disobedience,” Christ has made right through his “obedience.” This includes the relationship between humans and God, the relationships between human beings, and, not least of all, the relationship between humankind and the cosmos itself. All of these broken relationships find their ultimate restoration and re-creation in Christ.

God’s first step in this process of restoration and re-creation is the resurrection of Jesus. Paul refers to Christ as “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20). And he proclaims that Christ’s resurrection is the signpost for more to come: “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:23). And we too, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are part of God’s “re-creation” agenda. Our lives, like that of Jesus, who suffered, died, and was buried, are destined for resurrection. In Paul’s words, “God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (1 Cor. 6:14). And because our bodies are destined for resurrection, *our bodies matter to God and what we do with them is crucial.* This means ethics, everyday ethics, environmental ethics, all those decisions that we make about how to live our lives and what to do with our bodies. Paul’s entire ethical discussion in his letters to the churches is grounded in the hope of the resurrection. In Paul’s words, “The body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (1 Cor. 6:13-

14). And elsewhere he adds, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (1 Cor. 15:32b). Resurrection matters for the way we live our lives.

But in the end it is all of creation that is destined for redemption and restoration. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul proclaims that God “set forth in Christ . . . a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9-10). In his letter to the Colossians Paul describes this “gathering up” action: “For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell; and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20). And John the Revelator speaks of the “new heaven,” the “new earth,” and the “new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:1-2). God’s “re-creation” agenda encompasses all of God’s creation. And God’s reconciliation through Jesus Christ extends to “all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” This is God’s final word on “Creation and the Environment.”

And where does this leave us? What is our calling in light of God’s cosmic agenda for restoration, re-creation, and reconciliation of all creation? Paul says it best. At the end of a painstaking and impassioned discussion about resurrection, where Paul tries to explain the mysteries of God in language that the Corinthians can understand, Paul sums it all up: **“Therefore, my beloved [that is, because of the Resurrection and because God has destroyed death], be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). May God give us the grace to be faithful to this calling as we live in our cosmos. Amen**

1. Weaver, Dorothy Jean. “The New Testament and the Environment: Toward a Christology for the Cosmos” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* ( Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 125.
2. Ibid., emphasis mine.
3. Weaver, p. 126.
4. Weaver, p. 134.