Joint Annual Meeting 2021 Article Study:

The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary, (Fortress Press 2011) by David Rhoads, Paul Santmire, and Norman C. Habel, ed., "A Theology of Liturgy in a New Key: Worshiping With Creation."

A Theology of Liturgy in a New Key
Worshiping With Creation

Worship is the central recurring event in the life of a Christian community. Christian worship is a ritual in which God sets us in right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with our fellow creatures. Now it is time to integrate God's creation explicitly and comprehensively into the dynamics of worship so that we can be much more aware of how God sets us in right relationship with the natural world.

Worship is a symbiotic relationship between God and the worshipping community. God is giving and acting, and worshippers are responding in faith. Although the word "worship" implies that it is predominantly about what we do, worship is really preeminently about what God is doing.[1] God is actively present in all of God's Trinitarian fullness—forgiving, offering God's self in the proclamation of the Word through scripture and preaching, healing and restoring through the sacramental bread and wine, blessing the community, and commissioning worshipers to carry out God's work in the world.

In the past, our worship has focused mainly on the relationship between God and humans. In recent years, however, we have become more attuned to the extraordinary number of references throughout our traditions of worship to God as the creator and to a concern for the well-being of other creatures. We have begun to lift up these traditions and to give them prominence. In addition, new editions of hymnals and weekly resources for worship in many denominations are bringing to the fore God's relationship with all creation and our relationship with the rest of creation. We now are on the cusp of articulating theologies of worship that fully integrate creation and of developing even more liturgical resources to bring fundamental change to the worshipers' relationship with God and with the rest of nature.

The Season of Creation is intended to highlight and strengthen this movement. It offers us an opportunity to turn our full attention toward God the creator and toward our relationship with the whole creation. The experience of worship during the Season of Creation has been exhilarating for many congregations. However, God's relationship with creation and our relationship with the rest of creation must become integral and common to *all* worship, not just the Season of Creation. Hence, this theological reflection on worship is meant for more than the Season of Creation. It is an expression of theology in a new key for our worship in every time and place.

Worship as Re-Orientation

Worship is about being reinstated to our proper place in relation to God, ourselves, our fellow humans, and all other creatures. It is like being lost in the woods and then stopping to orient ourselves by means of a compass—and then finding our way home. It is like being lost at sea and then stopping to locate ourselves by means of the constellations in the sky—and then returning to solid ground. It is like using a global positioning locator to know just where we are in relation to everything else. Worship is a matter of getting our godly bearings and being situated in our true and rightful place in the universe. In this process, it is not we who set ourselves right,

[1] On this point, see, for example, Craig Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009).

however. Rather, when we worship we put ourselves in a position to allow God to give us our bearings, to reorient us, to restore us to our rightful relationships.[2]

We find our relationships restored through the specific portions of the liturgy. For example, by praising God, we restore God to God's rightful place in our lives as the one who creates and sustains us. By thanksgiving, we recognize our human dependence on God for life and health. By confession and forgiveness, we position ourselves to overcome our self-alienation and the brokenness of our relationships with one another and all creation. By hearing the word, we rediscover a proper sense of direction and purpose in life. Through the offering, we dedicate ourselves and our resources as gifts of God to this renewed vocation. Through prayer, we express a longing for all who are lost or broken to be restored to a place of wholeness in relationship. By communing together, we return from alienation to a harmonious connection with others of the human community and the rest of creation. With blessing and commission, we go out with a renewed sense of who we are, where we are, and where we are going. We have found our bearings, and we have reaffirmed who we truly are and whose we truly are—and, in so doing, we have found our home, our place of belonging. And we know what we are called to be and to do in our life in the world.

It is important to grasp clearly that the relationship with God in worship—God's action and our response in faith—is not simply a matter of moving into a relationship. It is not just a re-connection. It is a deep inter-relationship of participation in the life of God. The Gospel of John refers to it as a relationship of "abiding in" (John 15:1-11; 17:20-24). In worship, we are not just merely working our way through a rite; we are enacting a drama of personal and communal transformation. And it is not just our thoughts and ideas that are being transformed but our whole selves in relation to God and to creation. God is really present, not just revealing knowledge about God but revealing God's very own self to us and for us and the entire creation. In worship, we are called into intimate communion with the God who has created us and all things. We are called into relationship with the Christ who redeems us and the whole creation. And we are called to share in the life of the Holy Spirit who empowers and sustains us and all creatures.

Restoring our Relationship with the Rest of Nature

In practice, however, our restoration/reorientation through worship has tended to leave out an important, indeed crucial, relationship. We are reoriented to God, self, and the human community, but often we have experienced that reorientation without a self-conscious reorientation of our relationship with the rest of creation, which is the matrix in which we live and move and have our being. We are a part of nature. Along with all other living beings and non-living things, we are nature. Creation is one reality.

If God created the world as a place in which human life is inextricably woven into the rest of creation, then we need to make the natural world self-consciously an integral part of our worshiping experience. If worship means being restored to our proper place in the world in order to reorient us, to recall who we are, where we have come from, the things upon which we depend, and that for which we are responsible, then worship must be a celebration of all of creation and a reorientation of ourselves to our proper place within it. Just as human health and

[2] For a theology of liturgy that also treats worship as reorientation, albeit in a different way, see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003).

well-being, peace and justice, are dependent on our right relationships with each other, so also they are dependent on our relationships with the rest of creation. According to the creation story in Genesis 1, this is what we are called to do: Love God, love our neighbors, care for creation.

A Theology of Worship

Why is it important to articulate a "theology" of worship? There has always been a close relationship between theology and worship, as indeed there should be. Worship expresses what we believe. It embodies the theologies we espouse, for better or for worse. It manifests in the gathered community the most significant views we embrace about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, as we change our theology, so we must change our worship in order to reflect what we most ardently believe. Indeed, throughout history, theologies have changed and expanded. And they are changing again today in relation to the ecological challenges of planet Earth and of our increased awareness of the natural world and our human relationship to it.

It is no longer possible to do a serious constructive or systematic theology without encompassing the centrality of God the creator and of creation itself. Nor is it any longer viable to do a theology of the Old Testament or the New Testament without shifting the weight of the study to embrace God's relationship with all of creation. We see the Bible with new eyes and understand God's redeeming work in fresh ways.[3] So also, our theology of worship should reflect the same shift. Our worship needs to embody these developments as we discern more fully the dimensions of God's word and work.[4]

Consider the changes that took place in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century: theology was conceived in new ways; the Bible was interpreted with new eyes; ethical commitments were reconfigured; and worship was transformed. The same could be said of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. Due to changing times and fresh challenges, the church has always risen to the occasion. Now we are facing ecological threats to the very existence of life as we have known it on Earth. Is there any doubt that this defining issue of the twenty-first century represents a challenge to the church? We are called to rise to this challenge and to address our human relationship with the rest of nature.

Given this new understanding of the challenges of our time, we must reshape and enhance our worship so that our relationship with the whole creation is writ large across our liturgies, our lectionaries, and our church year—not just with a few phrases here and there, not just with an occasional hymn, not just with a few special days in the church calendar. Our relationship with all creation must now become as central and as obvious in worship as is our relationship with God and with each other. God's love of creation, God's desire to redeem creation, and God's action in reorienting our human relationship with the rest of creation ought to be so present in all we do in worship that it claims our hearts and minds with enthusiasm. This involves making God the creator and creation itself an integral part of everything we do in worship.

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[3] For an instructive exploration of biblical creation theology, see Terence E Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).
[4] For further development of this theme, see Lathrop, *Holy Ground* and H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

Celebrating the Season of Creation gives us a vision of what that kind of worship could be like in every liturgical season—as we celebrate the role of Christ in redeeming creation and the work of the Holy Spirit in sustaining creation. The Season of Creation can be the basis for transforming all of our worship in a new key.

Worshiping together with all of Nature

Perhaps the most important thing we can say about a new theology of liturgy is that we are called to worship and praise God *with* nature. Remember that Scripture calls for the hills to clap their hands and the trees to sing for joy, along with animals and sea creatures, the seas and the soils, the fields and the grain. The psalmist calls out: "All creation, praise the Lord" (Ps. 148:13; cf. also 1 Chron. 16:29-34 as well as Ps.104 and Ps. 148, among others). Hence, nature itself is to be experienced as part of our worshipping community, as our partner in praise.

Worship as New Creation

We have emphasized worship as two-dimensional: the actions of God orienting us to right relationships and our faithful responses to God's actions. The reorientation to the natural world brought about by God in worship represents a fundamental change of direction for us. It is not just a matter of accommodating a few new ideas or practices. Further, restoration to relationship with God, others, and nature is by no means the same as assimilation into the society and culture around us. Reconciled relationships with God will orient us to values, actions, and structures that may go against the grain of the world around us. They can be fundamentally counter-cultural. Reconciled relationships with other humans will set us at odds with the injustices, oppressions, neglect, and discrimination by groups and individuals not sharing the values of the church. Being reoriented to a love of nature and the care for creation may likewise lead us to resist and oppose the practices of local and national governments, businesses, corporations, and others who contribute to the flagrant degradations of Earth's natural systems and life..

Worship can be subversive of the culture and an expression of counter-cultural thinking and acting. Worship can lead us to counter the consumer mentality and practices of our time that treat people and Earth as commodities to be exploited. It can lead us to advocate for public policies and laws that foster love of neighbor and care for creation. At the same time, our re-orientation in worship may lead us to affirm many movements and actions in the culture around us that further the kinds of values and behaviors fostered by Christian ways of being in the world.

By drawing us into a reorientation in relationships, worship is meant to give us a taste of new creation—creation redeemed and reconciled. For this brief period of time, we celebrate our communion with God, with each other, and with all creation so that we get a glimpse of God's vision for the whole world. We are placed on the trajectory that God is moving toward in order to bring creation to fulfillment. We have suspended the claims of the world around us, yet brought that world with us into worship, seen it and ourselves transformed, and then re-visioned that world as God's creation. With this experience of transformation, we re-enter our ordinary lives as changed people, ready to re-make the world as God would have it made anew, in whatever ways, modest or visionary, that the Spirit of God inspires us to follow

In this comprehensive sense, then, worship is a radical reorientation. It is re-socialization at a primary level.. It challenges the core values of our culture, which we sometimes assume to

be fixed. It invites us into a way of being in the world that is healing and wholesome, that fosters justice and peace, that bears reverence for life, that enhances care for people and nature, and that serves rather than dominates

Care for Creation in the Seasons and Days of the Church Year

Again, worship in solidarity with all creation is a goal for more than the Season of Creation. It is the kind of worship we are called to practice all year and in every season. Each season of the church year lends itself to the thematic development of our relationship with all creation.

- Advent Season: all creation groans together as we await redemption and restoration of all of life. Advent is a time to repent in preparation for a new age in which the leaves of the trees, as John the Seer depicts it in his vision of the new Jerusalem, will be "a healing for the nations" (Rev. 22:2).
- Epiphany Season: here we celebrate the manifestation and glory of God not only in the arrival of the Christ child but also in the light and glory of God present in the beautiful works of human creativity and in the magnificence of the whole Earth and indeed in the resplendent vastness of the whole cosmos.
- Lenten Season: During Lent, we recognize our complicity in sin, not only against God and not only against to one another, but also in our individual and corporate actions that have degraded the rest of nature. We grieve losses to God's good Earth and reflect on the sacrifices we must make to stop our sins against creation even as we seek to hear, with new ears, the voice of every suffering creature.
- Easter Season: We celebrate the resurrection of human life and envision the restoration/ regeneration of the entire cosmos as a new creation.
- Pentecost Season (or "Ordinary Time"): We reflect on the spiritual wisdom we need and the actions we can take—as individuals, as congregations, and as a society—to live in a world where human and non-human creation can thrive together in the full flourishing that only the Spirit can give.
- Season of Creation: We focus on God as creator and the wonders of creation, all designed to help us love creation as God does and commit ourselves to care for it and rejoice in it.
- Special Days: There are many special occasions in the year when it is especially appropriate that care for creation becomes the focus of the whole service, such as St. Francis Day and Rogation Day. There are also days in the life of many cultures that are opportunities for celebrating creation, such as Thanksgiving Day and Earth Day Sunday. Special services might include a Blessing of the Animals, tree planting ceremonies, and the greening of the cross service, among others.

In all of these seasons and days, there is the opportunity to encompass all of God's creation in our observances and celebrations. Seasonal decorations, banners, and sayings can keep this message before the congregation throughout the year. Further, we can enhance the experience of worship by bringing signs of living nature into the sanctuary: placing greenery/flowering plants or trees in the church, giving people seeds or seedlings to plant, decorating the sanctuary with natural art, opening the sanctuary to natural light through windows and skylights, and worshiping outside. We can also employ special colors (Earth tones!), paraments, banners, and other decorative appointments for the Season of Creation. Green is beautiful! But so is white, as the lilies of the field attest, and so indeed are all colors, as we know from the witness of the rainbow.

Earth-friendly practices can also contribute to the integrity and witness of the worship: beeswax candles instead of oil-based candles; home-grown plants or flowers instead of commercially produced products transported from a distance (the latter may bring with them the stain of injustice); local wine and organic, wholegrain bread; post-consumer paper; a basket to recycle bulletins at exits; minimized paper and energy use; communion practices that limit waste (for example, glass drinking cups instead of disposable plastic cups); worship vessels cleaned in an Earth-safe detergent; fair trade palms purchased for Palm Sunday.

In all these ways, we can create an ethos in the congregation that will pervade worship with care for creation and with an experience of the God-given integrity of nature itself.

Summary

In order for us to be truly reoriented by God in our worship, we should incorporate love for, celebration of, concern for, prayer for, and a commitment to care for all creation into every dimension of our worship experience. Just as we cannot imagine worship without praise of God or prayer for those in need, so too we should not be able to imagine worship without expressions of our love for and our commitment to care for God's creation. We now turn to explore essential elements of the theology that help us to worship in this new key.

Part One
The Invocation: The God of all Creation and A Theology of Earth Sanctuary

The reorientation generated by worship begins by emphasizing the image of the God who is depicted in the first article of the Christian creeds. The God whose active presence we invoke in worship is the creator of the immense universe through all time and space. This God is not only a personal God and a God of human beings. This God is also the One who created and continues to create the heavens and the Earth. From beginning to end the work of God has to do with all creation. The following invocations seem appropriate.

> We invoke the active presence of God the Father who formed all creation, God the Son who redeems all creation, and God the Spirit who sustains all creation and brings it to fulfillment.
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> "In communion with all of Earth-community, we gather to worship God who is the creator of all things, the savior of all things, and the life-giver of all things."

When we lift up this image of God as creator, then we also need to rethink the dimensions of the sanctuary within which we worship; for example,

> "In communion with all the Earth, we gather to worship God the creator of all things, God the redeemer of all things, and God the sustainer of all things."

Only a sanctuary the size of Earth itself is adequate for our worship. Only then do we begin to adequately honor God as creator. Only then are we able to embrace fully all the living creatures and non-living realities of the Earth community upon which humans depend and with whom we share this creation. We enter into an awareness of this all-encompassing sanctuary of Earth when we acknowledge and invoke the active presence of the One who fills all creation with glory.

Down-to-Earth Worship

A fundamental way to allow God to reorient us in worship, then, is to see Earth, rather than the walls of our own church building, as our sanctuary. In this respect, as we worship Earth is, for us, a sacred space, a place where God is active and where God encounters us. Scriptures reveal God's presence permeating all creation and making it sacred. Consider Isaiah's spectacular vision (Isaiah 6:3), incorporated in many Eucharistic prayers:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!
The whole Earth is full of God's glory (Isa. 6:3).

The apostle Paul also makes it quite clear that the invisible power and presence of God can be known to all people on Earth, so that we have no excuse for not knowing there is a creator (Rom. 1:19-20).[5]

When we take seriously the presence of God in the whole creation, moreover, we are called to rethink our idea of God so as to look to God not only above us in the heavens but also "deep down things."[6] In the past, we tended to accept the traditional cosmology of ancient peoples, the view of the cosmos that heaven is up and Earth is down, and so we prayed "up" as if God were only above in heaven. Now we have a new view of the universe and planet Earth in relation to which we may think of God as everywhere in all things. This actually turns out to be closer to the biblical view in the sense that God is filling Earth with God's glory. Also, the Bible presents the view that the impulse of our Creator is to move down into this world. While we do pray "Our Father who art in heaven," all the more so we also pray "Your kingdom come . . . on Earth. . . ." (Matt. 6:9-10). So we confess that God is vitally present in all creatures, human and non-human.

This biblical revelation of how the glory of God fills Earth—and indeed all of creation—does not claim that creation itself is God. We do not worship creation. God's presence is "in, with, and under" every aspect of this world, as Martin Luther teaches us.[7] Of course, the most powerful and the definitive revelation of God's glory are seen in the person of Jesus Christ. And it is from God's presence and activity in Jesus that we know what God's holiness and glory are like everywhere in creation. Seeing God-made-flesh in Christ, we can then "lift up our eyes to the hills" as the psalmist says (Ps. 121:1), and indeed contemplate the whole creation and the glory of God the creator.

Call this the re-sacralization of creation. When we see God in Christ and then also in, with, and under the whole Earth and indeed the whole cosmos, then, for us, all things are sacred. Closer at hand, too, is this: if God is so intimately and immediately present in all things, God is not only in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and in all the people as the body of Christ; God is also present in the paraments and the banners, in the flowers and in the candles, in the altar and in the symbols, in the organ and in the pews, in the actions and in the gestures, in the speaking and in the song, in the light and in the dark.[8] All of these have the effect of connecting us with their root and source in the larger sanctuary of Earth, because all of these derive from living and

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[5] On Paul, see David Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, eds., *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).
[6] A phrase used by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.
[7] For a review of Luther's theology of Divine immanence, see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 128-132.
[8] For a more detailed discussion of these ideas, see Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 154-174.

non-living realities in creation. When this discernment happens, we have succeeded in breaking down the barrier between church and world, between insiders and outsiders, between worshipers and nature. Whether in the church building or outside, the ground upon which we stand is "holy ground." All of our worship reflects the glorious presence of God permeating all things.

Many of us have had experiences in which God encounters us in our relationship with the natural world. In seeing Earth as God's sanctuary, we are honoring those experiences and we are acknowledging that God actively seeks us through nature, just as God seeks us through other people. As Martin Luther has written, "Our home, field, garden, and everything, is full of Bible, where God through his wondrous works not only preaches, but also knocks on our eyes, touches our senses, and somehow enlightens our hearts."[9] By worshipping with Earth as our sanctuary, we build on those sacred experiences of nature and make ourselves open to God reaching us through nature all the more.

A Sanctuary for All of Life

When we commence worship by invoking the presence of the creator God in God's entire sanctuary of Earth, we are acutely aware that this Earth is an endangered planet—to a great extent due to our own desecration of the air, the land, and the waters of Earth. How can we treat Earth differently? We humans sometimes designate certain areas of land, air, and water as natural "sanctuaries" that offer protection to a variety of animals, species of plants, and whole eco-systems. Can we not think of all Earth as God's sanctuary for the benefit of the whole Earth-community that God has created? Can we not think of this Earth sanctuary as a place of safety and well-being for all creatures great and small?

This is the challenge we have right at the beginning of our worship—to broaden our horizon so that we have a vision of God writ large over creation and so that we are reoriented in relationship not only with one another and with all humanity but also with God's whole creation.

Part Two
The Invitation and Gloria: A Theology of Kinship with Creation

Our reorientation in worship continues with the call to worship or invocation—as we affirm our solidarity with the rest of creation by inviting all creation to join in worship. In this process, we not only praise God for creation, we also worship God with creation.

> We invite the birds and the insects, the animals on land and the fish of the sea, the rocks and the trees, the soil and the air, the mountains and the valleys, the oceans and the rivers, the sun, the moon, and all stars to join in communion with us this day in bringing glory and praise to the God who has created us and who sustains us forever.

We might include the other members of Earth community who live together with us on our church property.

> Today we invite as our partners in worship the pine trees that live on our property, the plants in our garden, the lush grass and the bright bushes, the cardinals and the crows that feed on the worms, the beetles and the bees, the

[9] Luther, Martin. Werke (Weimar Ausgabe), XLIX: 434, cited by Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited," *Dialog* 44:1 (Spring, 2005), 58.

rabbits and the raccoons who share this space with us. Join us in praise of our Creator.

We might state this invocation in an inverse way, namely, that we are calling ourselves to join the rest of creation in worship already taking place everywhere.

Today we call ourselves to join in the hymn of all creation—with the wrens and the robins, the otters and the owls, the baboons and the butterflies, the elm trees and the pine trees, the rice and the snow peas, the grass and the grasshoppers, the lava and the lakes, the mountains and the seas, and all created things everywhere.

We are invited to "join the communion of all creation," to "let heaven and nature sing" and to "let all creation join in one, to praise [God's] holy name." All together, the choir of creation acknowledges God as the inexhaustible source of life and goodness.

Conversion to Earth

To consider worshiping *with* our kin in creation may require something of a conversion. The fundamental problem that this new theology of worship addresses is our human alienation from the rest of God's creation and our consequent misuse of God's creation. In worship, God is restoring us to our relationship to Earth by broadening our worship experience to encompass all that God loves and by connecting us to all that Christ seeks to redeem and reconcile, by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

In order to worship with creation, we first of all need to recognize our kinship with the rest of creation—including Earth as our primal parent. As Genesis 2 teaches us, living things have all commonly emerged from the soil. So we are all kin. To view Earth as other than mere matter and to know all creatures as our kin may, as we have suggested, require a radical change of consciousness. But this is the truth we now confess with new enthusiasm. God is reorienting us to a relationship with Earth so that we can now experience all creatures as our kin, as we join in the praise of all creation.

Likewise, the concept of evolution teaches us that humans have a biological connection with other creatures and a common origin in Earth. Humans are born of Earth, and so "we are creatures of the Earth."[10] We are comprised of the same elements that make up the planet and the same stardust of which the galaxies are composed. The cells of our bodies are composed of 65 to 90 percent water. We share DNA in common with other creatures. Hence, we are all kin biologically. We are "natural" creatures through and through.

As such, the scientific construct of evolution helps us to understand much more concretely what Genesis 2 means when it says that humans are "of the soil." This is how the Bible sees our kinship with the larger world of nature. When Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there!" (Job 1:21), he meant a coming from and a return to Earth as his mother. In Genesis 2, Earth is the common source of all living beings. God molds the first human, Adam (`adam), from the soil (`adamah) of Earth. Adam's name means "Earth-man." Similarly, in Genesis 1, all animal life comes from the `adamah of Earth. God says, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of all kinds" (Gen. 1:24). And God says, "Let Earth put forth vegetation" (Gen. 1:11). All humans and all fauna and flora share the same origin and the same ground, Earth.

[10] David Suzuki and Amanda McConnell, *The Sacred Balance. Rediscovering our Place in Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 38.

Kinship among the living creatures in this garden world extends particularly to breath. According to the Bible, all living things are commonly animated by God's breath.

The Choir of All Creation.

To grasp how it is that creation is to praise God, we need to understand that Earth and members of Earth community are not treated as "it" in the Bible. Earth is often personalized—as subject who can hear the voice of God (Isa. 1:2; 34.1; 49.13; Jer. 6:19; 22:29; Joel 2:21-22), as having emotions, as capable of suffering and mourning (Isa. 24:4; 33:9; Jer. 4:28; 12:4, 11; 14:4; 23.10; Joel 1:18-20), and as obeying God's commands. As such, we can view Earth in personal relationship with God and with us as a worshipping community.

And indeed, like humans, this entire created order is called to praise God. Just listen to some of the acclamations in the Bible: "Worship the lord in holy splendor: tremble before him all the earth;" "Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;" "And let them say among the nations, 'The Lord is king;'" "Let the sea roar and all that fills it;" "Let the field exalt and everything in it." "Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord" (I Chron. 16:29-34; Ps. 148). In Psalm 148, everything from sun and moon to sea monsters and snow are called upon to praise God—along with all rulers and peoples of Earth. Our invocation invites us to join with the whole choir of creation. Our call to worship is to "Let all creation praise the Lord."

Of course, we need not assume that plants and animals have special voices for praise. Rather, they praise God simply by being who they were created to be and by thriving in that life. But God has ears to hear this "music of the spheres" all the more. This understanding of praise means that when we humans behave in ways that harm or destroy other living things, we diminish their capacity to praise God! Then the land languishes and the grape vines dry up and the wheat withers. Then their voice is one of lament. Being in solidarity with the rest of nature makes us acutely aware of the ways in which plants and animals suffer, often as a result of human activity. Can we then also worship in ways that enable us to lament with other creatures as well as to celebrate with them, and to express our responsibility toward them? If we will do so, only then will we truly join them in worship with integrity, as the God we know in the Bible intends us to do.

We need to find ways in worship to make this common voice a reality. We need to use our imaginations to consider how our worship might change so that we praise God with creation. As we have suggested, we can begin by inviting other-kind to join human-kind in our worship. And we can so fill our liturgies with references to fellow creatures that our kinship with them permeates all we do in our worship. Also, can we be aware of the natural surroundings of our worship center? Can we bring life into the sanctuary, such as trees and plants and flowers, and even living things like fish and birds and gerbils? Can we use the service of the Blessing of the Animals (human and non-human animals alike!) as an opportunity to strengthen our kinship with nature and to be more aware of our common worship with these and all living things? Some congregations have even experimented with the use of visual projections of images of the galaxies and their myriad stars on the worship center walls. In this way, in our mind's eye, our sanctuary for worship can become not just a building, and not even just the Earth itself, but the entire universe. We can see the entire creation in our worship, in John Calvin's words, as "the theater of God's glory."[11]

[11] Calvin uses this expression often. For references and explication of this theme, see Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand rapids: Baker Books, 1991), especially 145-146, note 40.

Part Three
The Confession: A Theology of Alienation and Reconciliation

Confession and absolution in worship are based on a theology of alienation and reconciliation. Traditionally, we have confessed the sins we have committed—both individually and collectively—against God and other humans. Our reorientation in worship means that we will now also confess our sins against the rest of nature, against God's creation. In the case of sins against Earth, our confession is rooted in the fact that we humans have become alienated from Earth and need to be deeply reconnected to Earth as our home and restored to a proper and life-giving relationship with God's creation. In response to our confession, we hear the word of Christ that our sins against creation are forgiven and our alienation from Earth is healed. We hear the invitation of Christ to return to a new relationship with Earth as our home—with a vocation of service to Earth rather than a relationship of domination and exploitation.

Sins Against Creation

It is appropriate in our worship that we make confession of our sins against creation. Having invoked the presence of God the creator, having seen Earth as the sanctuary of our worship, having established our human solidarity with all creation, and having invited the whole Earth community into a chorus of praise, we must now acknowledge our broken relationship with creation. How have we polluted and desecrated this sanctuary called Earth? What crimes have we committed against creation? How have we, individually and collectively, contributed to endangering life on our planet?

The point is that the ecological crisis is not just an environmental issue. Fundamentally, it is a religious and spiritual issue, resulting from the fact that we humans have become alienated from the rest of nature.[12] Only recently have churches recognized that environmental devastation is a sin against creation, even a blasphemy against God. Our sins against creation are many and longstanding. We commit them in our personal behavior; we commit them together as part of our way of life in the economic and social systems of which we are a part .

Earth as Disposable; Heavenism as Sin

One reason we have sinned against creation is that we have focused on an other-worldly religion to the detriment of Earth. We have relegated God to heaven and to a life after death, seeing this world merely as a place of pilgrimage or even just as a place for human mastery. This view may be termed "heavenism"—a belief that ultimately heaven above is our only and true home and Earth is but a stopover on the road to eternity. After death, we leave our bodies, and our souls go to heaven. The body is disposable, like some ill-begotten plastic bottle. However, this view ignores the biblical emphasis on our life together in this world and the ultimate affirmation of the resurrection of the body.

A similar image is that Earth itself as disposable. According to some popular views, Earth will continue to deteriorate until its final destruction at the hands of God. Before that day of

[12] See also the Introduction to *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet,* ed. David Rhoads (New York: Continuum, 2007), xiii-xx.

wrath, however, the faithful will be caught up in the rapture to escape the final conflagration. Earth itself is destined for destruction, as if God would slough off creation for some spiritual reality alone.[13] These negative religious attitudes to Earth reinforce the secular view of a disposable world, a society in which everything can be used and thrown away—somewhere. However, none of these views accounts for the biblical expectation that Jesus is returning—here! Nor does it account for the world-affirming vision in the Book of Revelation of a renewed heaven and a renewed Earth here—where God will dwell!

Earth as Inferior; Domination as Sin

Many of us in the Western/Northern world have been conditioned by our religious traditions and by our cultures to believe that human beings are superior to the rest of creation in a way that gives us the right to dominate nature. This attitude is reinforced by some interpretations of Genesis 1, which maintain that this passage gives humans the right to "dominate" nature and to "subdue" it, in God's image no less. This view has engendered a deep-seated belief in some Christian circles that human beings have been commissioned by God to rule over all creatures and that we are therefore free to exploit Earth for our own purposes.

However, recent interpretations of Genesis 1 suggest a different interpretation. The need to "subdue" nature was rooted in the constant threats to humans from nature at that time. People had to control nature in those days in order protect cities from floods and themselves from attacks by wild animals. Furthermore, as we know from some of the Bible's wisdom writings , the word "dominion" did not necessarily mean to "dominate" but rather to "exercise responsibility for," as a good king would protect and care for those in the realm. This understanding is more in keeping with God's image in the Genesis creation stories, according to which God creates things as good in their own right, commands animals to multiply and fill the Earth, and creates humans last of all in order to take care of creation. Later, God instructs Noah to be responsible for preserving all species of animals.

Also of considerable import, the first creation story is set side-by-side with the second creation story in Genesis 2, according to which humans are mandated, as many Christians have been taught for generations, "to till and to keep" the land. But that familiar translation is probably better rendered in a different way. We now know that the term for "till" means to "serve" and that the term for "keep" means to "protect" or to "preserve." Humans are "to serve and to protect" Earth, a relationship that is the exact opposite of a mandate to dominate. Finally we have the teaching of Jesus, who told his disciples not to "dominate" or to "rule over" anyone, but to be a servant in all things (Mark 10:41-45). Also, strikingly, Jesus called his disciples to "behold the beauties of the lilies of the fields" (Matt. 6:28). Jesus thereby affirmed the faith of his forebears, that "the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1).

Only as we understand that our human vocation is to serve and protect God's good Earth will we see clearly how we have sinned in our disregard, our abuse, and our arrogance. As individuals and as a whole society, we have been curved in upon ourselves—having nature serve us like a slave rather than having us serve nature as beloved by God. When we see how we have been alienated from creation, we discover a desire to confess our sin in order to be restored to a healthy relationship of solidarity with the rest of nature.

[13] For a careful critique of such views, see Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004).

Confession and Reconciliation

Our confessions can enumerate the long list of destructive deeds humans have committed especially in our time. The list seems endless—pollution, poisoning with toxic waste, nuclear radiation, deforestation, excessive land clearance, breaching the ozone layer, extinction of species, and so on. We need to acknowledge them. And it is critical that we name them in worship, that we be specific—even about the ways we in our personal lives and in our local practices degrade creation.

Then we hear an absolution and a word of assurance from Christ. This assurance is a word of forgiveness for our sins. In light of this liberation from sin, we can recommit ourselves to our vocation to serve and to preserve —to rectify the wrongs we have done and to take actions to create a world in which all creation thrives together.

Just as we are reconciled with other humans by confession and forgiveness, so also we are reconciled with all creation. The reorientation of our worship calls us to see Earth as God's good creation, to confess our violations of creation, and to respond to God's call to care for it and to use it wisely, according to the mandates of God's justice. But this will not be easy. Conversion never is. For us to return to Earth, to overcome our separation from it, and to celebrate this garden planet as our home is a daunting task of reorientation.

Part Four
The Scripture Readings: A Theology of Listening

Throughout the liturgical year, we listen to God's Word through the reading of Scripture. In so doing, our ears may typically be attuned to hear the voice of the poor. Now they also need to be attuned to the voice of Earth itself, as it groans in travail. And in all of this we can hear the gospel message that the cosmic Christ reconciles all creation to God. These voices reorient us through our listening.

We Hear the Voice of God

We are familiar with God's good news for humans. Now we also hear the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do for the whole creation (including humans): God created the world and declared it to be good; God continues to make known God's glory everywhere in the world; Jesus announces the kingdom of God as restoration for all creation; God redeems the fallen world through Jesus; Jesus' death reconciles all things and brings about new creation; and God reveals a renewed heaven and a renewed Earth where God will dwell with people in peace and justice and will finally be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

God's words in Scripture bear the reality of which they speak. They bear not just ideas about God, but the active presence of God's reality. The active presence of God makes the announcements of good news "performative words," words that carry out the blessings and the forgiveness and the healings and the love that they announce. So we need to listen carefully not only for words bringing redemption and liberation for humans but also for words announcing restoration for the land and the waters and the nourishment and provision for all living creatures.

We Hear the Voice of the Poor

Scripture makes clear that God's love gravitates to the most vulnerable in society: the poor, the oppressed, the abandoned, and the marginalized. In most societies, such people do not have a voice. Scripture gives them a voice. The Old Testament is filled with prophets who speak on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the orphans, and the widows. Jesus himself speaks on behalf of the "least of these" when he declares that the final judgment is based on goodness toward them. Jesus announces the year of the Lord's favor on behalf of the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus "came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Paul also advocates on behalf of the weak. And James condemns any favoritism toward the rich when he asks: "Has not God chosen the poor?" (Jas. 2:5). Scripture thus gives a powerful voice to the vulnerable.

We Hear the Voice of Earth

We also need to hear in Scripture the voice of suffering nature itself. Leonardo Boff has said that we need to listen to "the cry of the poor" and also to "the cry of the Earth."[14] This is critical to reorientation in worship, namely, that we attune our ears to hear in Scripture the voice of Earth. If God knows the fall of every sparrow, then "who will speak for the sparrow?"[15] Clearly Scripture does. And having been brought in worship to a sense of solidarity with creation, having been forgiven our sins against Earth, and having become reconciled to creation, we can listen closely to the voice of Earth in the proclamation of the Word.

Voices of praise are not the only sounds of Earth. When the capacity of creation to praise God is diminished, then we hear another voice from Earth, a voice of suffering and languishing, sounds of mourning and lament. Prophets, whose spirits were especially sensitive to the voices of the natural world, announce that Earth mourns and fields lament. Earth and Earth-community suffer and mourn (Isa. 24:4; 33:9; Jer. 4:28; 12:4, 11; 14:4; 23.10; Joel 1:18-20). Earth may tremble or quake in response to human or divine deeds (Jer. 8:16; 10:10; 49:21). At the very end of his oath of innocence, Job swears that he will let his land become thorns and weeds if the land has "cried out" against him and its furrows have "wept together" (Job 31:38-40). Job is sensitive to more than the need for human justice in his community; he also knows the cry of injustice that can rise from Earth (cf. Joel 1:10, 18, 20).

In other texts, Earth suffers grievous harm, but no cry is heard. Jeremiah's vision of this devastation of Earth reaches cosmic proportions: "I looked on Earth, and lo, it was lifeless and empty! I looked to the skies and they had no light!" (4:23). In Jeremiah's vision, Earth returns to the lifeless and empty state that existed before creation (Gen. 1:2): the birds flee, the mountains shake, and the farmlands become deserts. After railing about human injustice and the prosperity of the wicked, Jeremiah declares, "How long will Earth mourn, And the grass of every field wither? Because of the wickedness of those who live in it, the animals and the birds are swept away" (Jer. 12:4) In this portrayal, Earth itself has empathy for humans who are suffering at the hands of the wealthy and the powerful. Earth mourns because of human injustice.

Groaning in Travail

[14] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 104.
[15] David Rhoads, "Who Will Speak for the Sparrow? Eco-Justice Criticism and the New Testament" in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God: Festschrift for Robert Tannehill* (T & T Clark, 2003), 64-86.

Perhaps the most powerful expression of Earth suffering is found in Romans 8:18-27. All creation is groaning because of the forces of destruction and the crimes against creation that reach back to the very first curse imposed on Earth because of the sins of humanity.

> For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation but we ourselves, who have the fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8.19-23).

Paul's view of creation is that of a subject with an inner longing, with deep empathy. Indeed, humans and nature groan together.

Here the groaning of creation, however, is not one of resignation. Paul discerns that the suffering of creation has creative potential. Creation is waiting for renewal and liberation. The groans of creation are not the last gasps of a dying cosmos. Far from it! The Greek term used here refers to "labor pains," the groaning of a woman in childbirth. Paul is signaling that creation is an active participant in God's plan for redemption and restoration. Earth is waiting for the revealing of children of God who will live together in justice and who will care for Earth.

Hearing the Voice of Earth Today

Clearly the suffering of creation today is far more extensive and serious than ever before. The cries of the fallen forests, the dying deserts, and the polluted air rise daily from Earth. It is an axiom of social justice that that the true depth and force of any injustice can only be understood by those experiencing that injustice. Their voice must be heard and taken with utmost seriousness—and made an integral part of our human quest for justice!

Many people throughout the world have heard the cry of creation, especially people who live close to the land. Native peoples who live their lives in interrelationship with the land hear the voice of Earth: Native Americans, the Rainbow people of Australia, and many others. The words of Yunupingu reflect their pain:

> I understand that Mother earth is suffering because there is so much devastation. Trees are dying and have to be cleared away, lands are cut by floodwaters and many other types of environmental destruction are taking place. That is when you experience the suffering of the Spirit of the Land.[16]

How we hear the voices of nature in worship is something we need to explore. In addition to naming the cries of creation, we can listen to the voice of Earth in Scripture. We can include readings in worship by contemporary poets and prophets who have a genuine spirit of empathy for Earth. We might even compose and read "Epistles from Earth" so as to give Earth a voice. We could write lamentations of the Spirit, reflecting the groaning of the Spirit of God empathizing with Earth. Creation is groaning aloud for those with ears sensitive enough to hear—from Scripture, from those who speak on Earth's behalf, and from creation itself. Can we hear them? And if we can, how should we respond?

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[16] G. Yunupingu "Concepts of Land and Spirituality," in *Aboriginal Spirituality, Past, Present and Future*, ed. A. Pattel-Gray (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1996), 9-10.

Part Five
Proclaiming the Gospel: A Theology of Incarnation and Reconciliation

Central to our proclamation in preaching is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news of Christ is based on a theology of the incarnation. In Christ, God is manifest in the biological web of life in a profound and definitive way. We accept the full weight of this affirmation, namely, that this word emerged in flesh and "dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God emerges enfleshed as a human being; the Creator is manifest as clay; the Word is born in the flesh as Mary's child. Jesus was not a fleeting docetic visitor, not a ghostly bearer of some gnostic truth, but a mortal, a truly human being, flesh and blood.

Jesus was a very specific human being in time and place—a Jewish male born to Mary and Joseph in first century Palestine in the eastern Mediterranean world under the Roman Empire, an Israelite raised in Nazareth of Galilee, a carpenter by trade, publically active in Galilee and surrounding areas, recognized as prophet and teacher with disciples and followers, at odds with the leaders of Israel, and executed in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, insofar as Jesus belongs fully to Earth, God becomes incarnate in Earth. All the natural biological processes of human flesh are true of Jesus. Jesus smells, tastes, and feels as all humans do. Jesus breathes the same air with all other living creatures on Earth, eats food grown from the same ground, and drinks water from the same wells. In Jesus, God is manifested in the web of life. God becomes part of Earth's biology. Jesus was fully rooted in creation as all human beings are rooted in nature. Put in contemporary terms, Jesus was a mammal, a homo sapien, a higher primate, in the gene pool, with human DNA. This claim represents the contemporary affirmation of the full humanity of Jesus.

Christian theology has sometimes emphasized the humanity of Jesus in a way that has diminished the role of Christ in the original creation and eclipsed the ongoing relationship of Christ with creation. The risen Christ has been seen as a spiritual being who is detached from Earth, who resides in heaven and who is liberated from the burden of the material world. In contrast to this point of view, our proclamation recognizes that the good news of Jesus Christ encompasses all of creation. We affirm a theology in which Christ is rooted in creation, redeems creation, and fulfills creation.

Christ Active in Creation

So we proclaim that Christ was active in creation from the very beginning. The Gospel of John affirms that the Word existed in the beginning and that "all things came into being through him" (John 1:2). As such, the cosmos has a christic imprint. Hence, when the Word became flesh in Jesus, he did not do so as a stranger to flesh. As Paul Collins writes, "Christ comes to all things, not as a stranger, for he is the first born of all creation, and in him all things were created."[17] Furthermore, God raised the crucified Jesus to be the cosmic Christ who reconciles and restores all things in creation.[18]

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[17] Collins, Paul. *God's Earth: Religion as If It Really Mattered* (Melbourne: Dove, 1995), 82.

[18] On the "cosmic Christ," see Dennis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1991) and Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 111-115, 195-198, and 201-203.

Jesus' Presence in Creation

The Gospel of John affirms that the glory of God that was manifested in Christ is the very glory that fills all of Earth. This insight is critical: the God we see manifested as the Christ reveals to us the God who is present but hidden in all creation. Hence, the activity we see in Jesus becomes the lens through which we discern God in all things. As Paul says, "God is working for good in all things" (Rom. 8:28).

Hence, as Collins writes, "Christ is not only the matrix and prius of all things: he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things . . . Nor are all things a tumbled multitude of facts in an unrelated mass, for in him all things hold together."[19] Jesus is the Wisdom of God who "gathers all things" (Eph 1:10), "is the head of all things" (Eph 1:23), "fills all in all" (Eph 1:23), "creates all things" (Col 1:15), "holds all things together" (Col 1:17), "reconciles all things" (Col 1:20), "sustains all things" (Heb 1:3), and is the "heir of all things" (Heb 1:10).

Through his Life and Through his Death, Christ Redeems Creation

Jesus proclaimed a kingdom that restores not just humanity but all creation, including humanity, as one reality. Jesus calmed storms, provided bread for the hungry in the desert, liberated people from demonic powers in nature, made common cause with the most vulnerable in society, healed the sick, preached good news to the poor, told parables using examples of nature, forgave sinners, welcomed the outcasts, and blessed the children. And he called others to join him in this mission to proclaim the good news of this kingdom.

God's incarnation in creation is especially revealed in the cross. We tend to think of God in relation to nature as present in the grandeur of nature, the wondrous and awesome manifestations of nature. In the shame and ignominy of the cross, we become aware of God's presence in the tragic, the violent, and the ugly dimensions of nature. If God is present in such a gruesome reality as the cross, then God is surely everywhere in life. Just as the cross shows God to be in solidarity with suffering humanity, so also the cross shows God to be in solidarity with the tragic and suffering places in all nature as well. The cross keeps us from romanticizing nature or idealizing it. The cross enables us to face the terrible aspects of creation and to know that God is there too, just as God is hidden in the event of the cross.

The cross is the supreme revelation of who God is and what God is about. As Larry Rasmussen says, "The cross is the indecent exposure and scandal of God . . . . God is concealed in a vilified and broken human being, Jesus is God made poor and abused."[20] The God of suffering love revealed in Jesus Christ lives as a servant and dies a shameful death on a cross. Yet this is the very God whose presence fills Earth." Or, as Niels Gregersen writes, ". . . . the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as the victims of social competition."[21]

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[19] Collins, *God's Earth*, 82.

[20] Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to our Senses: The Theology of the Cross as a Theology of Ecojustice," in *After Nature's Revolt. Ecojustice and Theology*, ed. Dieter Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 47.

[21] Niels Gregerson, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001, 205.

Christ Reconciles All Creation

The God whose presence fills Earth and who suffers with creation is also the God who through Christ is restoring creation and reconciling alienated dimensions of the creation. The resurrection is more than the rising of an individual human from the grave; it is the rising of the Lord of the whole creation who will one day consummate that whole creation. The incarnate Christ became the risen Christ—the "cosmic Christ" who is already at work transforming the cosmos, restoring creation, reconciling all things. There is no separation of creation and redemption here. There is seamless continuity. Redemption can even be considered God's ongoing creative activity in a restorative mode. Already in the prophet Second Isaiah, the terms *creation* and *salvation* began to be used to identify the same works of God, sometimes interchangeably.

This reconciliation overcomes all forms of alienation. Not only are humans alienated from each other by violence, war, enmity, and neglect, but also the integrity of creation has been violated by invasive acts of human domination and greed. The sins that Christ overcomes are not merely the personal wrongs of individual humans, but the massive corporate environmental injustices perpetrated against creation.[22] These destructive forces not only separate humans from Earth as their home, they also lead to the disintegration of those bonds that hold together the intricate ecosystems in God's creation. Christ is the "lamb of God" who takes away not only my sins but also "the sins of the whole world." And as the cosmic Christ, he continues to be the power of reconciliation for bringing into communion the alienated forces and the disconnected pieces of God's world.

This reconciliation brings peace between God and humans (2 Cor. 5:18) as well as between human communities in conflict (Eph. 2:14-16). Of special significance here is the message of Colossians and Ephesians that this reconciliation extends to "all things." God reconciles "all things" to God's self whether in heaven or on Earth (Eph. 1:20). All alienation in creation is being overcome by Christ. The incarnation of God makes possible a "cosmic reconciliation"—the work of God that bears a radical healing reaching into all corners of the cosmos. How? By a spectacular cosmic conquest? No! Rather, this cosmic peace is effected through the God who suffers on the cross with a suffering humanity and with a suffering creation. We are called to preach and proclaim this good news for all creation!

Good News in Word and Deed

The proclamation of good news in worship impresses upon us that God's creative and redemptive work is for all creation, such that we can see our relationship with God and our response to God's saving activity within this larger orbit. But more, the good news is not only directed to humans *about* creation, the gospel is also to be directed *to* creation itself. In the so-called lost ending of Mark's Gospel, Jesus exhorts his followers to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to "the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

How do we proclaim good news to all creation? Our words of good news to non-human creation and our blessings on Earth can have a greater effect than we might think. But our good news is also conveyed by our actions of love and care, as we ourselves become agents of reconciliation with the rest of creation, as we let our actions speak louder than our words. God's

[22] On this point, see Norman Habel, "The Crucified Land: Towards Our Reconciliation with Earth," *Colloquium* 28 (1996), 15.

wounded planet will not be healed by God waving some grand cosmic wand that removes all ills and immediately turns people into friends of the Earth. Only as humans take up the cross will the suffering for others, all others, turn into healing for the weak and into mending for the broken. This message in word and deed is surely good news for the whole creation!

Part Six
Prayer and Offering. A Theology of Creation as Gift

Offerings and prayers belong together as presentations of ourselves and the world around us as gifts from God given back to God. Our offerings back to God are tokens of the fact that we recognize all of life as gifted to us from God. Our prayers of thanksgiving are spoken with this awareness. Our prayers of petition match these in the sense that we pray for realities that are now broken and need restoration as re-creation from the One who created them in the first place. Prayers involves God's power to heal humans, non-humans, and all Earth community.

Prayer as Thanksgiving

Prayers of thanksgiving are critical, because they prevent us from taking for granted what has been provided by God—not just family and loved ones and co-workers and neighbors and companions in the faith but also the entire created world of which we are a part and upon which we depend as human beings. Unless we are specific about that for which we are thankful, we will tend to neglect it. We commonly pray for people for whom we are grateful. Now we will want to expand our prayers of thanksgiving to include deer and dolphins, woodpeckers and whippoorwills, lions and ladybugs, whales and worms. More particularly, it will be important for us to give thanks for specific plants and animals of Earth community that share our church land and that are found in our neighborhoods.

To be sure, thanksgiving can reinforce our focus on ourselves alone when we assume that all of life is a gift just to us. However, if we dislodge ourselves from the center, we can give thanks that animals and plants exist and have life in their own right. And we can be grateful that the grass is created for the cattle, the trees are given as nesting places for birds, the mountain crags provide a dwelling for the goats, as Psalm 104: 27 puts it—grateful that "all receive their food in due season." Hence, in solidarity with other life forms, we can give thanks to God both for ourselves and on behalf of other living things. We all live together. We all share Earth together. God created us all together. God redeems us all together. God will bring all creatures to fulfillment together. Hence our gratitude will fittingly be expressed together.

Prayer as Petition

Prayer petitions also affirm the giftedness of life. When we pray for those who are sick or injured or in trouble or for those whose life is diminished, we are turning for help and healing to the very One who gave us life. Now we will also want to offer supplication for nature around us. We pray in solidarity and empathy with those for whom we offer petitions. Again, it is important to be specific—about global, regional, and local threatened species, endangered animals, air quality, clean water, food security, removal of toxins on land and in the oceans, among others.

The letter to the Hebrews teaches us how to pray in solidarity with creation: "Remember [in your prayers] those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them. Remember [in

your prayers] those being mistreated as though you yourselves were being mistreated" (Heb. 13:3). If we pray for fellow humans with this kind of solidarity, can we not also express the same empathy for endangered plants and polluted waterways and harm done to marine animals in oil spills? Can we not remember, in prayer, the animals facing extinction as though we ourselves were facing extinction? Can we not remember, in prayer, the fish ingesting mercury in the water as though we ourselves were exposed to mercury?

As with thanksgiving, prayers of petition will as a matter of course acknowledge the interdependence of our world. We can pray for the healing of those who have cancer at the same time that we pray for the removal from our food of cancer-inducing toxins. We can pray for the relief of those with lung disease along with the purifying of the air. We can pray for the restoration of a whole ecosystem—human and non-human life together—that has been devastated by environmental disasters. As we pray, we will recognize not only the brokenness of our personal lives but also the systemic human degradation of the ecosystems that support life in general.

Offerings

Our offerings are usually monetary, representative of the possessions we have, a portion of all that we own and all that we receive as income. They are, of course, a sign that all we have and use and receive are from the abundance of God's Earth. Everything belongs to God and we benefit from it. That is the foundational theology of what is addressed in our "stewardship" commitments.[23]

So how can we make this giftedness of all things real to us? Could we offer at worship some portion of *everything* we have? Some food? Some home-products to share? Some tools of our trade? Some clothes? Shoes? Some papers from school or work? Some food or flowers from a garden? Some examples of the fruits of our labor to dedicate before the altar? Could we offer so many of our things, even out of our need, that we see how all things belong to God and all things are to be shared? Would this perhaps lead us to see our food and clothing, our homes and yards, our pets and persons as fully part of God's world, and not as "our property"?

Offering the gifts from God as gifts to others in worship is directly countercultural to the consumer mentality that governs so much of our common life together. Our consumer mentality leads us to define ourselves by the things we have. We own property. We claim property rights to do with what we own as we please. We claim a right to accumulate any and all things we can. We freely dispose of things. "The market" economy is based on unlimited goods and unlimited disposal. It is based on competition. We allow our identities to be determined by productivity—how much we possess, how much our labor is worth—by whether we work or not. The market gives everything a monetary value, treating people as resources and the rest of nature as commodities to be bought and sold.

The offering of ourselves and our possessions to God counters all this and baptizes our economic practices in grace. We see things as gifts to be shared. We value living things in their own right. We treat life with reverence. We express gratitude for it. We know our limits as humans. We walk softly on the Earth. We seek to use what we have for the common good. We find place for giftedness in an economy of grace. We seek cooperation and collaboration more

[23] On the ambiguities of the concept of "stewardship," see Santmire, *Ritualizing Natur*e, 252-258.

than competition. The astounding experience of gathering for worship in order to offer ourselves and our belongings back to God places us in a different relationship with one another, with all living things, and with the blessings of Earth. It challenges our culture and calls us into a new creation.

Ethical Implications

All of our worship from beginning to end has ethical implications. This has been true from the time of the Hebrew prophets, who declared that God wanted nothing to do with worship unless there was justice in the land. All elements of worship have moral mandates. We highlight this point here because offerings and prayers are especially obvious in their ethical implications. Offerings and prayers can reinforce our solidarity with the rest of nature so that we will want to make a commitment to do what we can on behalf of those for whom we pray and on behalf of the offerings we dedicate to God.

Our prayers and offerings take us out of a human-centered mentality as we share our gifts and as we pray for others. We are drawn away from ourselves to focus on God's relationship to the whole creation. Often we decide what we are going to do and ask God to bless it. Now in prayer and offering as we present God's world back to God, we are led to think about what God is doing in the world and to ask what it is that we can do to be part of God's larger purposes. What part do we play in this new creation?

Part Seven
The Sacraments: A Theology of Presence

In the reorientation that God accomplishes among us in worship, the Eucharistic meal is the moment when it all comes together. Here, the community participates in the new creation as concrete and real. The community participates in that new reality with each other as a communion of saints. In our reorientation in worship, we now become aware that the Eucharist is also an expression of our communion with all creation—because God's presence in bread and wine connects us with God's presence in creation. In this sense, the Eucharist is a healing experience of restoration and reconciliation for all of life.

The Presence of Christ in the Sacraments and in All Creation

We have affirmed that Christ is "in, with, and under" all creation. The sacrament makes it clear that this is not just a generic statement about God's presence. Rather, Christ is concretely in, with, and under each thing in creation. We know that Christ is present in the worshipers, who are the Body of Christ. The Eucharist affirms that Christ is also present in the bread and in the wine as we receive the "body of Christ" and "the blood of Christ." The elements bear Christ to us. The words of the Eucharist do not put the presence of Christ into the bread and wine. That presence is already there, as it is in all things. Rather, the words of the Eucharist reveal in a clear and definitive way that we can count on God's presence in these elements. This meal is sacramental, because it is paradigmatic for God's presence everywhere. And we faithfully receive the bread and wine as representative of all the gifts of God's creation, all of which bear Christ's presence.

One key to the sacraments, then, is not that Christ is present only in the elements of the sacrament as we eat and drink "in remembrance" of him. Rather, the presence of Christ in those

elements assures us of the presence of Christ everywhere and in everything.[24] If Christ is present in such ordinary elements as grapes and grain, such daily realities as bread and wine, then we can be assured that Christ is in every other element of creation. Martin Luther said that the entire reality of God, without reserve, is present in every single grain of wheat and in every single leaf of the vine.[25] As such, our transcendent God is not floating loose somewhere beyond, but is bound to creation. In this sense, creation is God's home, even as we can think of it as our sanctuary. Hence, as we have said, all creation is sacral, not just the Eucharistic meal. In a sense, then, this Eucharistic meal is linked with every other meal, every eating and every drinking. If all things are God's, then every meal is a sacral event in which we are offered life from God.

The sacraments assure us that finite realities can bear infinite realities. We partake of the power of the invisible risen and ascended Christ through his presence in the visible elements of the bread and wine. The specific life-giving impulses that are mediated through this sacred meal include forgiveness, bonding, and healing. There is no dualism here. Material reality is worthy to bear spiritual reality. The Eucharist is thus an extraordinary expression of the affirmation of all creation. All creation is good; and it is well worth redeeming. Matter is good; and it can be wedded to the spiritual. Bread and wine do not have to be changed into something else in order to become Christ's body and blood. The bread and wine remain the same; and at the same time they are the body and blood of Christ. Christ is present in, with, and under the elements, the worshipers, and the whole creation.

The Eucharist Encompasses Space and Time

The God of the eucharistic meal is a God who fills all creation with the Divine presence, from the most distant stardust to the bread and wine on the table. The God who is present in Holy Communion is the cosmic Christ who gathers all things to himself. Given this cosmic perspective, the Eucharistic table becomes a symbol of the center of the cosmos.

Not only does the Eucharist witness to God in all space, it also witnesses to God in all time. The Eucharist recalls for us the past. It recalls the meal that Christ had with his disciples, the moment when Christ offered himself for the life of the world, in word and then in act. It recalls for us the resurrection of Jesus and Jesus' risen presence among us. The Eucharist also anticipates the final meal, the messianic banquet. Hence, by recollection and anticipation, the Eucharist brings the past and the future into the present time.

In these ways, the Eucharist is an event where space and time come together—all creation reaching back to Christ, the Alpha of all things, and straining forward to Christ, who is to come again, the Omega of all things. All of this is given to us *in the present* in the compassion and goodness and forgiveness we encounter in Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine.

Discerning the Body

[24] For this extended reading of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist, see Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 167-171. This view of the Eucharist does not preclude traditions with diverse views of the Eucharist from also affirming the presence of Christ in all things.
[25] For an explication of Luther's thought in this respect, see Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 129ff.

Paul said that if we partake of this meal "without discerning the body," we eat in an "unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11: 27-28). Discerning the body here does not refer to a belief that the risen body of Christ is really present in the bread and wine. That affirmation is taken for granted. Rather, by "the body" Paul here means the body of Christ as the gathered community. In this context, he meant that in the meal, some participants were eating their fill while others were going hungry. To eat without sensitivity to the body of Christ, that is, to those among them who were hungry, is to eat and drink in an unworthy way. As such, sharing in the communion of saints without discerning the needs of the world's weak and vulnerable is to partake unworthily. Which is a sobering thought, since the "Eucharist is today celebrated in a world where over one thousand million people are regularly hungry."[26]

And more: If we are to take the mandate to "discern the body" seriously, we will want to see ourselves in the context of the cosmic Christ, who fills sanctuary Eart and, indeed, the whole creation. Paul says that all creation eagerly anticipates the revealing of children of God who will care for this creation in ways that will enable creation to thrive. Eucharist today is celebrated in a world where species face extinction, waterways are degraded, and natural habitats are being destroyed. If we see that the whole creation is groaning, then we are called to eat and drink in a way that is mindful not only of our fellow humans everywhere who are vulnerable but also of our animal and plant kin that are endangered.

Can we embrace in the moment of this sacrament a transforming experience of new creation? Can we enter into a vision of the Eucharist in which we are in communion with all Earth-community? Can we commit ourselves to Earth community in a way that enables us to partake in a manner that is worthy of the Lord? Can we so encounter Christ in the sacrament that we can also contemplate Christ's glorious presence in the whole creation?

Part Eight
The Commission and Blessing: A Theology of Ministry

The commission and blessing for worshiping with creation are based on a theology of ministry to Earth. We hear the call of Christ to serve by caring for Earth. We are ready to consider our commitment to serve and protect Earth as followers of Christ. We announce our intent to love nature and nurture Earth as nature has long nurtured us.

> May the God of all creation bless you and keep you.
> May the God of all people bless your dedication to care for the poor.
> May the God whose glory fills the world bless your commitment to serve Earth.
>
> "Go in peace," the leader says, "Remember the poor. Care for the Earth."
> And the people say, "Thanks be to God."

The Third Mission of the Church

[26] Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth. A Call to a New Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 171.

A theology of Earth ministry requires a heightened awareness of mission to creation, what may be called the "third mission" of the Church.[27] Traditionally, the first mission of the church, grounded in Matthew 28:19, is to go into the world and to preach the gospel to the greater human community and to disciple all nations for Christ. The second mission, grounded in Luke 4.18-19, extends the saving power of Christ to liberate human beings from the systemic forces that oppress them so that they can embrace God's work in the world.

The third mission of the church goes beyond the first two and embraces the whole Earth (Mark 16:15). This mission brings the message that there is good news for Earth. It involves participating in the ministry of the cosmic Christ and being claimed by the works of the groaning Spirit, as we find ways to halt the destructive forces at work against creation and as we indentify, wherever possible, the often-obscured, God-given forces of renewal in the life of creation itself.

A Vocation to Serve and to Protect Earth

We are here reminded of Genesis 2 and the announcement of the commission from God for humans to serve and to protect the Earth. According to the Genesis account, then, earthkeeping is the foundational vocation of all humans. And, as we have seen, both God and Earth are our partners with humans in our earthkeeping vocation. After the first human being was created, God placed him in a fertile garden of trees to serve and to protect it. Christ's teaching affirms this vocation. Disciples of Christ are called to be servants of all. By implication, the "all" includes "all things" in creation. Our mission, then, includes a vocation to minister to Earth and to serve our kin in creation. This role implies that we stand in solidarity with creation and that we cooperate with God and with nature in restoring Earth.

Earth as Partner in Healing

It is common today to hear expressions like "saving earth," "sustaining earth," "preserving this planet," and "healing earth." Unfortunately, the language of healing can too easily be subsumed under a medical model where Earth is the patient and humans are the experts, the scientists with all the technological answers. Clearly, the contribution of science and technology are absolutely critical. Nevertheless, there is sometimes an inherent arrogance in that kind of medical model. By contrast, we seek a medical model in which the patient is partner in the healing process. As children of Earth, we seek to relate to Earth as a partner.[28] If we are to be involved in restoring nature, then, we need to begin with openness to the healing capacities inherent in nature and to discern how creation heals itself and us. Healing begins with recognizing that we are working *with* our kin in creation and with Earth.

The process of mutual healing and nurture extends to all aspects of life on Earth and indeed to Earth itself. This impulse to nurture comes from God's Spirit moving through creation.

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[27] See Norman Habel, "The Third Mission of the Church; Good News for the Earth," *Trinity Occasional Papers* XVII, 1 (1998) 31-43 and David Rhoads and Barbara Rossing, "A Beloved Earth Community: Christian Mission in an Ecological Age in *Mission After Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission*, eds. Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 128-143.

[28] See Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 216-244.

Suzuki and O'Connell call this spiritual impulse to nurture the "law of love" in nature. They write:

> When we observe the care with which a mud dauber prepares a mud enclosure, inserts a paralyzed victim as food, and deposits an egg, can we be so anthropocentric as to deny this the name of love. How else can we interpret the male sea horse's protective act of accepting babies into his pouch, the months-long incubation of an emperor penguin's egg on the feet of its vigilant parent or the epic journey of Pacific salmon returning from their natal stream to mate and die in the creation of the next generation? If these are innate actions dictated by genetically encoded instructions, all the more reason to conclude that love in its many manifestations is fashioned into the very blueprint of life.[29]

The spiritual impulse to nurture or to love that is deep within Earth and within the creatures of Earth is a force we need to recognize as vital to our connection with Earth. We need to return to Earth and discover again ways to experience these nurturing impulses and to live in harmony with them. For our God is a God whose healing Spirit renews the very ground from which it emerges (Ps. 104:30).

At the same time, as the Scriptures teach us, and as the Book of Job in particular makes undeniably clear, we also need to be very much aware of this disturbing truth: there is much in nature that is strange and alien to us, a sobering fact that we already had occasion to notice. In this respect, nature is not our friend, nor a source of healing. Stars are swept into black holes. Tsunami waves swallow ships and demolish islands. Rats spread plagues in cities, and mosquitoes swarm over children in rural areas bringing the scourge of smallpox. The Bible knows this alien side of nature well.[30] Recognition of this dimension of the natural world will instill a spirit of humility in us and give us occasion to ponder all the more the mysteries of God's providence, how in this era of God's history with the whole creation, "under the sign of the cross," we walk by faith, not be sight. We can contemplate the healing that is sometimes apparent in natural processes, to be sure. But when we do, we always see "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

The Love of God and Our Ministry to Creation

This nurture and healing power at work in creation, under the sign of the cross, is ultimately grounded in God's love for creation. Creation exists because God chose to create and continues to do so, in spite of what we have done to creation. The continuing love of God sustains all creation (Ps. 136:1-9). God rejoices in all things that God has made (Ps. 104:31). And God invites us to do the same: to love Earth, to nurture our kin, to embrace our home. We are called to love creation. We may "take care" of our possessions, but we "love" our children. We will not restore what we do not love.

Pursuing ecological justice for all Earth community—human and non-human life alike—is the very definition of our healing ministry to creation. Many ecologists argue that nature and the diverse parts of nature have an inherent right to survive and a right to justice. All of the natural world has intrinsic value and therefore ought to be accorded appropriate respect and God-given rights. Where the rights and integrity of creation have been violated, especially by human

[29] Suzuki and McConnell, *The Sacred Balance*, 173.
[30] See also Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*.

beings, Earth cries out for justice. But that cry is often not heard by those who are abusing Earth. We in the church are called to be prophets, like the prophets of old. We are called to hear the cries of Earth and the cries of the poor and to speak against the injustices done to them. As Paul Santmire writes,

> We Christians will be a voice for the voiceless, for the sake of the creatures of nature who have no voice in human affairs. We will listen to the plaintiff cries of the great whales and hear the groaning of the forest, and we will be their advocates in the village square and in the courts of power, by the grace of God. All the more so we will hear the bitter wailing of little children who live on the trash mountains and who wear clothes that have been washed in streams overflowing with heinous poisons and who sometimes drink these very waters.[31]

Ours is a prophetic mission, a call for justice and peace on Earth and for Earth. As advocates of justice, we recognize that social justice and ecological justice are interrelated needs. It is the oppressed who suffer most from the exploitation of forests and the pollution of our waters. It is people from poorer countries that suffer most from ecological disaster and degradation, people with the least protection and the fewest resources with which to respond. It is people of color who are faced with environmental racism. Environmental racism is perpetrated by many governments and corporations who dump toxic waste—including nuclear waste—and other toxins on communities of color and on indigenous peoples.[32]

Whatever the injustice, this is our ministry. We are called to listen to and to speak on behalf of the people and the lands of Earth—to expose the injustices and to right the wrongs. We assume this role as those who know Christ the crucified, who suffered with creation and for creation, with the oppressed and for the oppressed. The cross leads us to stand with the victims in their suffering.[33]

We leave the service of worship reoriented by God to a right relationship with the whole creation. As we do, we commit ourselves to be part of this third mission of the church to Earth, especially this freshly configured vision of our co-mission *with* nature, to love and nurture all creatures and all things—for God's sake!

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[31] H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn. The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 121.

[32] See Robert Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Atlanta: South End Press, 1996).

[33] Rasmussen, *Returning to Our Senses*, 54

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