



Chapter 5

Creation

As an expression of divine love, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and called them “good.” Everything belongs to God and should be cherished and used justly according to divine purposes. God sees creation as a whole without separation of spirit and element. God calls people of every generation to join with God as stewards in the loving care of creation.

Introduction

This paragraph affirms that God’s world is a gift of love and grace. Earth’s living organisms, both human and nonhuman, breathe in this gift of life from God the loving Creator. To refer to all things as “creation” immediately implies a divine point of reference: a Creator. Christian faith holds that creation in all its beauty, wonder, power, diversity, vulnerability, and mystery is an icon of the living God. Divine Spirit works unceasingly to create, sustain, and redeem all living things and guide them toward the wholeness of peace. God invites human beings to care for each other and all of nature. This call for us to be stewards of creation is fundamentally a call to love what God has generously created.

Creation is the good gift of God, whose eternal triune being is communal. Therefore, creation as a whole reflects in its vast web of relationships the relational, communal nature of God. Human beings, like all other animals, plants, and organisms are part of this larger, interrelated whole. We are all creatures, which, among other things, means we depend on each other for existence. Alike and different from other creatures we

share the same needs for air to breathe, water to drink, food to nourish, and resources for shelter. Each organism is unique and lives out its own special role within the whole of creation. At the same time, because all living things depend on each other, mutuality is at the heart of the good creation. We should not be surprised by this truth, since according to the doctrine of the Trinity, reciprocity is the essence of God's own life.

Regrettably, we human beings regularly fail to recognize, respect, or love the uniqueness of other species, natural habitats, and ecological processes. Many of our daily choices lead to wasteful consumption of the world's resources, energy, and lands. Our failure to accept that we are *part* of an interconnected whole contributes to the dangerous ecological crisis we face today. Climate change, species extinction, deforestation, desertification, cultural extinction, nuclear waste, and pollution of air, soil, and water are assaults upon the wholeness of the global community. How will we as Community of Christ contribute to the healing of Earth? How will we address the difficult ecological challenges before us? .

Biblical Foundations

Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions see human beings as stewards of creation. Stewardship is a radical call to live out divine love and compassion for all forms of life. We misunderstand this call if we see it merely as overseeing or managing human lives, other plants and animals, and/or ecological systems. Stewardship is not about placing ourselves over the rest of creation. This approach ignores the Spirit's presence in creation. To think of ourselves as "over" creation easily fosters corrupt, loveless, and exploitive lifestyles in relation to the rest of nature and the human community. On the other hand, following the wisdom of the scriptural witness, Community of Christ believes human beings are called to be God's partners in loving care of all creation. The creation itself in all its abundance and diversity reflects the bounty of God's love. Divine love, then, calls us to be in a healthy relationship with the world, not a hierarchical one. As imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1-2), we must generously care for all that exists.

The Bible repeatedly upholds the goodness of created life. In the Hebrew Scriptures, light and dark, the waters, the atmosphere, land, plants, birds, humans, and other animals are all declared "very good" (Genesis 1:31).¹ The natural world is essentially good, because it

¹ Genesis 1:1–2:4a says five times that God saw that creation was good.

originates from God's own being, will, and generosity. This conviction is the starting point for a uniquely Christian approach to our human experience, our relationship with God, and our own creatureliness within the web of a universe of creatures. Furthermore, the second Creation story in Genesis (2:4–3:24) identifies humans as a unity of body and spirit. We are made of the elements (dust, or in Hebrew *adamah*) of the Earth, touched by God's breath of life (*ruach*). Bodiliness is intrinsic to our existence, and we are meant to partake of and extend God's love for the creation as embodied beings (Genesis 2:7; Psalms 104:29; Job 34:14–15).

The story of the Flood ends with a sign: a rainbow by which God covenants with all humans, animals, plants, and the very Earth itself. God is committed to the flourishing of life. In this story, God chose to withhold destructive power and never again flood the Earth. The story, then, is a parable about divine restraint, while a parallel story in the book of Job reminds human beings of our part of the covenant. Through the whirlwind Job was taught humility, reminded of his limited knowledge and power, and allowed to see that human beings are not the center of or in control of all things. We are only part of a complex whole. In humility, restraint, generosity, and actions that help life flourish, humans are to share in God's covenant of peace with all of creation (Genesis 8:1–22 and Job 38–42).

Other important themes in Hebrew Scriptures are the Sabbath and Jubilee. These were sacred times when the lands, animals, and humans were to stop, rest, lay fallow, be refreshed, and regenerate (Leviticus 25). These themes in the Bible affirm that the meaning of creation is not found in constant activity and production. The land, animals, and people as a whole interrelated community thrive or suffer together. Therefore, different traditions from the Hebrew Bible believed that time for healing and renewal was part of God's desire for the world (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Human beings have a role in assuring that creation's gifts are not exhausted.

In the Psalms an "ecological chorus" praises the presence and fruitfulness of God's Spirit (Psalms 19:1–4 and 104). We also hear in the book of Isaiah a warning that the Earth will suffer at the hands of human beings if they transgress the laws. The Earth will groan and lament, dry up and wither, and suffer violence and destruction as it "lies polluted under its inhabitants" (Isaiah 24:5). Hebrew thinkers had a profound sense

of the earth as a living organism, vulnerable to human defilement, but having a voice of its own to cry to God.²

These Old Testament themes of the loving Creator, the good creation, humility and restraint, Sabbath and Jubilee, the interconnection of all life, God's live-giving Spirit, and the groaning and suffering of Earth reappear in the New Testament.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses imagery from Isaiah 24 to paint a cosmic picture of the future of creation: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves" (Romans 8:22-23). Human alienation from God, and our consequent inclination toward greed and self-centeredness, harms not only human beings but is a source of destructiveness to the rest of creation. But Paul goes on to announce the hope of God's future mending of the world. Salvation for Paul is not only about the human future, but the future of all things. The Spirit raised Christ from the dead, and in Paul's view this torrent of Spirit is now at work in our lives as part of the healing of the whole creation. It is vital for the church today, both theologically and ethically, to reclaim the biblical writers' view that salvation includes the whole creation. This is a potent reminder that our planet and ecosystems are not disposable.

Three important symbols from the New Testament further affirm the goodness of creaturely life: the Incarnation, the death of Christ as recalled in the Lord's Supper, and the Resurrection. These symbols reinforce for the church the centrality of God's gracious, self-emptying love and the hope for a transformed creation. In the Incarnation the divine *Logos* or Word of God becomes flesh and enters the world in the life of Jesus Christ. Here God is depicted as fully embracing matter and revealing the divine self by means of, not in spite of, what is physical. When we participate together in the sacrament of Communion, we remember Jesus' death by eating bread and drinking wine. The grains and fruits of the good creation are shared in remembrance of the body and blood of Christ. In taking flesh and blood, Christ shared in creation's pain and loss. The cross reminds the church that God has entered into the fullness of embodied life. In the resurrection of Jesus, we comprehend the divine declaration that embodied life is of eternal worth. God conserves life. Easter upholds a central truth: that embodiment is not a liability to relationship with God. Recalling the symbolism celebrated in these three

² Isaac S. Villegas, "All Earth Is Grieving," *Christian Century* (January 1, 2020).

central events in the story of Jesus Christ renews the church's identity and its convictions about the sacredness of creation.

Because it is so pivotal to the church's faith, the Incarnation deserves additional comment. The Gospel of John points to the very heart of the gospel with this line: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Jesus as the Son of God embodies the eternal Word through which God brought creation into being. This Word or *Logos* (in Greek) is the ordering principle of all that is. John's testimony is that the *Logos* is the means through which the Source has brought all things into existence. Further, the unique, historic life of Jesus Christ reveals God the Word entering into union with creation in the most complete and intimate way. For the church this means that God does not despise the physical but affirms it. Community of Christ is a cosmos-affirming, not cosmos-denying, faith.

Jesus the Word made Flesh says in John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5). This organic symbol suggests that his life now flows through the disciples' bodily lives. The One through whom the good creation came into being now makes us his companions in loving care for all creation. Jesus the Incarnate One represents for us the wholeness and inseparability of spirit and body. The Gospel of John thus emphasizes both Jesus' unique unity with God and his flesh and blood union with the world. Disciples find in the church's faith in the Incarnation power to live a vision of divine wholeness, compassion, and love in our relationships with each other and with the whole endangered creation.

Tradition

Christian tradition is rich with examples of healthy relationships with the natural world. The desert abbas and ammas, Christian monastics of the third to the fifth centuries mentioned in Chapter 3 discovered in the solitude of the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria a new awareness of their humanity before God, as well as of the plants, animals, and natural processes of the world around them. Life in the harsh desert helped draw them into deeper communion with the God of all living things. They developed a sense that their lives were continuous with the land, the very starkness of which opened them to the divine. The desert was a place to be respected for its beauty, wonder, and boundlessness, as well as its threatening character. Its vastness also helped these monastics see their own inner life more realistically. The desert fathers and mothers did not

worship the desert, but worshiped God alone. But the desert facilitated the detachment they sought in their ascetic lives, which “implied a sense of becoming one with the environment. Their *holiness was part and parcel of a sense of wholeness*. If at-one-ment with their neighbor was of the essence of desert spirituality, so too was at-tune-ment to their environment, to the world, and to God.”³

Within the quite different environment of Celtic Christianity, an intricate knot of primal (pagan and animistic) religion/spirituality was woven together with the Christianity of the Latin West. For Celtic Christians, forest groves, mountains, meadows, springs, and lakes were where divinity dwelt. Particular places were equated with kinship, the origins of one’s clan and social status. Celtic Christians, like the desert fathers and mothers, shared this sense of continuity with the land and the past. A strong “place-lore” told the stories of relationships to place. Birds and animals were highly significant within Celtic tradition and probably reflected the Celts’ deeply held sense of connection to place and the divine.⁴ This tradition has valuable wisdom for the church today, as we seek a re-enchantment with the natural world.

Perhaps the two best known ecologically aware Christians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of Assisi. Their lives and teachings reflected the medieval regard for the natural world as overflowing with God’s glory. Hildegard was a Benedictine abbess known for her prophetic visions, music, and art in the form of beautifully detailed illustrations called “illuminations.” She had a great knowledge of philosophy, literature, theology, medicine, herbalism, botany, and the natural sciences, as these were known in her time. A predominant theme in Hildegard’s writings was that of the greening power of God, or *veriditas* of nature.⁵

Francis of Assisi forsook the life of wealth he was born into, took a vow of poverty, and began an order of monks who imitated Jesus’ practice of wandering and preaching. His poetic writings and the stories that surround him have an enduring influence in literature, religion, and environmentalism. The most famous of his writings is perhaps “The Canticle of Brother Sun.” It was a hymn expressing God’s presence with and in elemental creation.

³ John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 85.

⁴ Oliver Davis, trans. and ed., *Celtic Spirituality: The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

⁵ William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 60, 72–75.

These examples from early and medieval Christianity recall for us the spiritual and theological importance of the natural world in the church's tradition. Today our global community faces severe ecological challenges our faith ancestors could not even have imagined. Since 1970, a growing number of theologians and lay persons have engaged in the development of ecological theologies and environmental ethics based on Christian scriptures and traditions. This movement explores the connection between Christian faith and social and ecological justice and peacemaking.⁶

The work and ministry of justice and peacemaking for all creation is not new to Community of Christ. We have received divine counsel that reminds us to become peacemakers and loving stewards of God's world. The church's early experiences and teachings reflect an inseparability of the spirit and body that is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The fullness of God's love, healing, peace, and joy are known through the inseparable connection of spirit and element (Doctrine and Covenants 90:5e; Genesis 2:7; Psalms 104:29; Job 34:14-15).

In 1972, the following direction came to the church: "These are portentous times. The lives of many are being sacrificed unnecessarily to the gods of war, greed, and avarice. The land is being desecrated by the thoughtless waste of vital resources. You must obey my commandments and be in the forefront of those who would mediate this needless destruction while there is yet day" (Doctrine and Covenants 150:7). Ten years later new counsel reminded us that "the time for hesitation is past. The earth, my creation, groans for the liberating truths of my gospel which have been given for the salvation of the world" (Doctrine and Covenants 155:7). The Spirit that is ever at work in creation is also the prophetic Spirit, calling God's people to seek justice and wholeness for all things.

As a response, the church created the Community of Christ Peace and Justice Team. Its commission was to study the root causes of war, violence, poverty, environmental degradation, inequality, and destructive choices and lifestyles. In 1992, the church commissioned a new committee, the Community of Christ Earth Stewardship Team. This team explored how to advance the church's work of protection of the environment through education, and to encourage congregations and International Headquarters to model responsible environmental choices.

⁶ For examples see For Further Reading below.

Two years later, the Independence Temple was dedicated to the pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit. In 1999 the Community of Christ Peace Colloquy, using the theme “As the Sky Meets the Earth,” focused on how individuals, communities, and institutions could become more justice-oriented and proactive in the care of creation. In the current time, following Jesus the Peaceful One has direct implications for how individuals, congregations, and the entire church must include care of creation in various ministries.

It is now urgent for the church individually and collectively to commit to practicing radical hospitality to our endangered ecosystem. Community of Christ’s traditions offer rich resources in our scriptures and practices for a deep ecological theology. However, the church has yet to embody the call to live out an uncompromising ethic of stewardship based on God’s love for all creation. Divine counsel to the church at the turn of the millennium again reminded us of the exigency for disciples to be in the forefront of justice and peacemaking for all life and ecological processes:

Generously share the invitation, ministries, and sacraments through which people can encounter the Living Christ who heals and reconciles through redemptive relationships in sacred community. The restoring of persons to healthy or righteous relationships with God, others, themselves, and the earth is at the heart of the purpose of your journey as a people of faith. ...

The earth, lovingly created as an environment for life to flourish, shudders in distress because creation’s natural and living systems are becoming exhausted from carrying the burden of human greed and conflict. Humankind must awaken from its illusion of independence and unrestrained consumption without lasting consequences.

Let the educational and community development endeavors of the church equip people of all ages to carry the ethics of Christ’s peace into all arenas of life. Prepare new generations of disciples to bring fresh vision to bear on the perplexing problems of poverty, disease, war, and environmental deterioration. Their contributions will be multiplied if their hearts are focused on God’s will for creation—Doctrine and Covenants 163:2b and 4b–c

The Spirit that midwifed creation calls Community of Christ to rise to the challenge of Earth’s travail.

Application for Discipleship

The world exists in and by divine love. The Spirit is itself the spirit of livingness. God loves and sustains life in all its abundance and dazzling diversity. The triune divine community created all life as an interconnected whole. These affirmations of our faith may help us imagine

creation as one neighborhood or community. Jesus' command to love our neighbor, then, extends in our time to the whole cosmos, with its countless intricate living systems. Nature, as our "neighbor," can as well be seen as the "poor among us," for in the biblical tradition, the poor were the most vulnerable. In our own time we also know that human poverty actually arises from the impoverishment of the land (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Psalms 19:1–4; 104; Isaiah 24:4–13) as desertification demonstrates.

Loving our neighbors must no longer be confined to the person next door, the person sitting next to us in church, or even those who live at the other side of the street. Loving our neighbors has become a pressing global call. It will require us to live ethically and compassionately in relationship with all creation. Exciting possibilities open up when we apply Jesus' command to love our neighbor to creatures like frogs and polar bears, to places like oceans and glaciers, and to the natural processes related to air, water, and soil. By loving all creation, we live and share God's sacred purposes for the world, which arose from the mystery of God's boundless love.

Community of Christ values sacred places. In our past journey as a people, and in our personal stories, we associate particular experiences of God's holiness with special locations. Our history celebrates sacred sites, like the Palmyra Grove, the Kirtland Temple, our numerous campgrounds, the Auditorium, and the Temple in Independence. These are for us what Celtic spirituality calls "thin places" where the distance between creator and creature disappears and we find ourselves vulnerable to grace in remarkable ways. These places connect us to our spiritual heritage, which calls deeper intentionality from us when we visit them. Thus, sacred places become uniquely transparent to a renewed vision of God's purposes for the world. For many members and friends of the church our sacred sites have become centers of spiritual pilgrimage and a refuge away from the stresses of daily life. Many visit our sacred places in hope of drawing closer to God.

However, if our buildings and special sites are to represent our loving care for creation in the current ecological crisis, we must ask ourselves some challenging questions. Do they utilize energy responsibly? Do they protect or provide natural habitat for other creatures than us? Do they promote holistic concepts of peace? Do we care for these places in ways that do not further harm the environment?

Our sacred sites prompt us to ask further what would happen if we began to perceive the whole creation as a *sacred place*? From our unique

experiences at a specific campground, for example, how might we work to transform our neighborhood into a “thin place”? How can we take what we experience at Kirtland, for example, and embody it in a transformative way in the places where we live, play, and work?

The sacred interconnection of life means that when we do things for the Earth, we do them for ourselves. Contemporary science readily sees this truth. When we improve the health of air and water, we improve our own health. To act for the well-being of a threatened species has far-ranging implications for human thriving. The poor of the earth are no longer only the human poor, for the creation itself has become impoverished. We confess that our future is linked to the welfare of *all* the poor: “in their welfare resides your welfare” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a). We cannot separate care for Earth (ecological justice) from care for people (social justice). We are made of the same stuff as the rest of creation. Whatever affects the parts, affects the whole.

Disciples have a choice to make. We can imitate God’s generosity with love for all living things. Or we can continue to walk the path toward ecological devastation, in which the few take what they want for personal benefit at the expense of the many. We are capable of thriving as a global community while at the same time cultivating, cherishing, protecting, and preserving the living systems all around us. The good news of the gospel invites us in the twenty-first century to be in love with the world as God is in love with the world.

Conclusion

All creation groans as it awaits the liberating touch of God’s love. Community of Christ believes it is among those called to bring healing to the world. A concept of salvation limited to a human future beyond time will miss the vital truth of our interrelatedness with all creation and the call to build the reign of God here and now. It will ignore the Bible’s own cosmic vision of salvation as the liberation of all things. That vision yet shapes Community of Christ. In its power, we must work against greed, exploitation, and violence toward others, whether those others are suffering people, plants and animals, or ecosystems. Understanding that God’s salvation is for the whole creation gives us new imagery to help work for the kind of peaceful and just communities God seeks.

In essence, to practice compassion toward the Earth and each other, we must seek the peace of Jesus Christ for all creation. God calls us today to break the bonds of fear and to live a radical kind of stewardship:

When your willingness to live in sacred community as Christ's new creation exceeds your natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation, you will become who you are called to be. The rise of Zion the beautiful, the peaceful reign of Christ, awaits your whole-hearted response to the call to make and steadfastly hold to God's covenant of peace in Jesus Christ.

This covenant entails sacramental living that respects and reveals God's presence and reconciling activity in creation. It requires whole-life stewardship dedicated to expanding the church's restoring ministries, especially those devoted to asserting the worth of persons, protecting the sacredness of creation, and relieving physical and spiritual suffering—Doctrine and Covenants 164:9b–c

For Further Reading

Leonardo Boff, *Ecology & Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1995).

Community of Christ Earth Stewardship Team,
www.cofchrist.org/earthsteward

Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Cowley, 2000).

Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

Testimony by John Glaser

Even as a child, I remember feeling angst at seeing pictures of burning rain forests and the wanton environmental destruction by humans. I have to credit my elementary teachers who taught us of the wealth of forests, nature, and the need to protect our environment. My adolescent character was fostered by social marketing campaigns and slogans by a cartoonish owl stating, "Give a hoot, don't pollute." It seems that the onset of adulthood gives us the ability to question the effectiveness of social marketing techniques by the authorities as demonstrated by the rise of debates regarding global warming. Some argue whether or not global warming is a real phenomenon. Meanwhile, environmental destruction continues unabated.

The voice of Community of Christ comforts me greatly. To know that we worship a God that values all of creation and values our participation in that creation gives me hope and grounds my faith. My discipleship requires me to consider the prophetic voices of others such as Rachel Carson. In her book *Silent Spring*, she challenged the pesticide economy that existed in her world by drawing ethical direction from the writings of Albert Schweitzer. We appreciate their voices for they resonate with the inspiration we draw from a God that demonstrates a reverence for all creation.

We in turn lift up the prophetic voice in our time and the places in which we live. It is not a voice that divides but instead seeks to heal others and our environment. To see the interconnectedness of life and spirit allows us not just to understand poverty and suffering, but to feel it. Beyond quantifying poverty, we are given the opportunity to experience it qualitatively and through all our rich human senses as Christ would have too. In feeling pain and poverty we are allowed the opportunity to be participants in creating change and in alleviating suffering.

Although we are drawn to the desire to create significant change in the world, we recognize that change as Christians is interpersonal and is realized in our daily interactions. For example, I was persuaded by a church colleague's life choices to engage in a plant-based diet. Although I began my diet last year for health reasons, my new eating habits and behaviors have begun to affect and alter my beliefs. I now see my relationship to food with new spiritual senses beyond the mere gustatory. This simple change in eating habits has allowed me to relate to the world around me with a renewed ethic and care for the environment, plants, animals, and humans. These meaningful changes have occurred due to my collegial relationship. Authentic human change is interpersonal. God's creation in all its beauty and wonder is to be shared one with another in interpersonal dialogue that goes beyond social marketing, mass media, and the sponsored content of the Internet. To borrow a phrase from my childhood, God indeed, gives a hoot.

Spiritual Practice: Holy Attention

Engaging in the practice of holy attention allows us to suspend our inner conversations and agendas and give reverent and receptive focus to a specific person or portion of God's creation. Respecting another as an unrepeatable miracle whose life journey is unique and sacred brings awareness to and affirmation of God's presence in all creation. We do this in the spirit of Christ who saw into the deep hearts of people and recognized their true identities as God's beloved. With this practice we begin to make space for awareness of where God is showing up in the world around us.

Enter a time of quiet reflection. Relax your body and breathing and bring to mind a particular person, group of people, or portion of creation. If you wish, reflect on a photo of a person or sit with something in creation and pay attention to it: a leaf, a tree, blade of grass, the sky, a bird. Ask God to bless you with curiosity and gratitude as you consider the life journey of others including creation.

- In what ways do you feel connected to this person, group, or portion of creation?
- What do you need to hear, see, feel, or learn?
- How are you being led to engage in actions that promote the well-being of this person, group, or portion of creation? Journal your reflections.

—Taken from "A Guide for Lent 2015,"

<https://www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/documents/2015-lent-guide.pdf>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do your life habits demonstrate responsible stewardship of God's entire creation? How can you become a better steward of creation?
2. As a result of reading this chapter, what new understandings did you develop about the role of humans in relating to the other elements of God's creation?