

Caretakers of Creation – Genesis chapter 2 & Luke 3: 21-22 (Baptism of Jesus)

Slide Wild Church

Just this August, I facilitated two what is called Church of the Wild practices. The group that attended did some “Holy Wandering” in the woods together. We had about 15 people at this last one as seen in the PowerPoint picture. For those who are unfamiliar with Church of the Wild, it’s a growing movement stemming from the tradition of Christian Spiritual direction, that invites us out of our buildings into a deeper relationship with the sacred and with God through nature. This movement is causing innovations in worship throughout the ELCA and all over the United States, and there are now over 200 congregations that either solely worship in nature no matter the weather (no kidding) or are connected to congregations like ours. I became a facilitator of Church of the Wild last October after taking the six-week course to facilitate these practices.

The practice often first begins with a time of listening to nature that is around us, to the birds, crickets, feeling the breeze, all the smells of nature and the sensations that arise out of having your feet planted firmly on the dirt or grass. This practice of simply listening and being in nature helps people to go from observers of the natural world to being participants of the natural world, the actual fact that we are ourselves nature, interconnected all that God created, nature and creatures around them. And, one might ask, why now? Why is this new innovative movement of church happening now? Is it just the next new hip thing to happen? Or is there something more?

Slide: Tattered Swallowtail

A man named Gus Speth, who is a lawyer and writer recently said the following: “I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science we could address those problems. But I think I’m wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.” Speth wondered if

these contemporary problems were now beyond the realm of science. They are, he states, now moral problems and concerns of ideology and theology. Whether or not a person should choose to think he is correct about this, or even think he is somewhere in between being wrong or right, I would like to think that problems of selfishness, greed, and apathy, while they may be beyond the realm of science, they are not beyond the realm of the church to address. In fact, we do not address them as the church, not only will the voice of those who follow Jesus become irrelevant, we will ignore the cries of creation that Holy Spirit's urging to renew it to our detriment. After all, the natural world would be just fine without us. We are not fine without the natural world.

Slide: Sand Hill Crane

And that is what leads us into the Season of Creation, a newish liturgical season that begins on September 1st with the World Day of Prayer for Creation and ends on the day of St. Francis on October 4th with the Blessing of the Animals. We are in year two of trying this liturgical season out here at St. John's. This is a season created out of the need for the church to respond to the real problems of selfishness, greed, and apathy over the natural world, but it's also a season of joy, thanksgiving, and gladness for the interconnectedness of all creation is and does. It is gift and challenge. It is blessing and confession. It is joy and grief. This Season of Creation stems from the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran Federation, Laudato SI and the United States of Catholic Bishops, along with the ELCA and most recently in 2021, the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, of which we are a part.

It seems we are at a crossroads, whereby the church can choose to ignore the real degradation of the world God made and asked us to till and keep or we can actually find hopeful ways forward to bring about healing and renewal for all of creation, including the whole human family within it. And, dare I just add that I'd like to think the religious community still has witness and merit in this world. Therefore, if the religious community of which we are a part, do not address the problems in creation and how to mend it, there is

not much hope for improvement over the problem of selfishness, greed, and apathy.

Slide: Forest

In the second creation account found in Genesis chapter two, we encounter a vision of a beautiful garden, an Eden, teeming with life. God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air. The man God creates, who later receives the name of Adam, is given the obligation and delight to name each creature: Imagine this! I call you sand hill crane! I call you dog! I call you Squirrel! I call you Whale! And an enormous river is also described in this account, a vast glorious river that waters the garden, full of trees of all kinds including the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The river is so abundant and beautiful that it has four branches that spin off from each other covering the whole of the land: Pishon, full of gold, Gihon of the land of Cush, Tigris east of Assyria, and last but not least, the Euphrates. Eden is beautiful. Desiring that beauty not to be spent in loneliness, God creates a partner for Adam named Eve for the compassion of God would never desire for anyone to be alone. Eden now has humankind to care for this garden, to till it, and to eat of any fruit of any tree except one.

And that story we know next. Eden was not to be for long as the human ones go their ways towards choosing selfishness, greed and apathy, otherwise known as free will or choice. And the work to care for this garden and till is in jeopardy. Now, we can go many ways with this and I've heard them all.

- We could use the problem of human sin and evil and simply say, "Well, there's nothing to be done about it at this point. It's too late anyway, right? Might as well eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die – to the detriment of future generations.
- We could excuse ourselves by putting it in God's control – In this creation story, it's clear that God would never let anything happen! God would create anything that humans could harm or make an impact in.
- We could use the heaven example by saying that the earth and all that God created is only a stopping place on our way to heaven.

- Or, we could succumb to despair and apathy, overwhelmed with the problems of life.

But, none of those ways are where this story really goes. There is another way.

Slide: Rainbow Coneflower

This creation story doesn't stop with human sin and our being alone in the world. Instead, this is a God who is loosed in the world through a person. And, it is this person God is truly, truly pleased with – the new Adam and Eve – Jesus the Christ. In just a couple of verses from Luke's Gospel, we see this. God opens the heavens and comes down. God is pleased and loves the creation so much with it that God longs to be in relationship and to save it. God so loves this world that the blessed Son is sent, not to condemn it, but save it. That same God, in a similar river, with a similar desire and purpose, here with us in Holy Baptism. This God turns water into wine. This God sits on a mountain to preach and heal and reveal. This God, the new Human One, uses elements of the creation to bring Good News: water, bread, wine. No, God has not left us and we are not alone as we struggle with our brokenness. God reignites us, forgives us, makes us new each day, so that when selfishness, greed and apathy reign, we can confess it again and again and make a change. Yes, my siblings in Christ, the Eden calls us through Holy Baptism each day. And God's Holy Spirit abides in it. Even now, we can restore what God gives and made.

Somehow, someday, the church must encourage and model love for all that God made. We cannot fulfill the Greatest Commandment to love God with all that we have and love our neighbor as ourselves unless we do practice care for all of creation. These go hand in hand. Psalm 24 begins with "The earth is God's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." How do we love God if we do not care for all? We can argue over how we do this and I would expect that we will and do as we are from varying backgrounds and opinions. But, that the church does not have a place in this conversation when we must, that we ignore to our irrelevance and loss as the people of God.

Slide: Aphrodite Butterfly

In 2021, at our Synod Assembly, the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin passed a resolution in support of creation care. Here is one of the parts of the resolution: *“Be it further resolved that the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin shall encourage all congregations in the synod to celebrate a four-week Season of Creation in the fall, and the Synod shall provide preaching and worship resources for this season.”* Our Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson also encouraged that congregations form Green Teams to better care for the creation. This year, we have done this. This team of volunteers from our congregation have gathered and have come up with both a Mission statement and a Vision Statement.

Mission Statement: We encourage our congregation through shared faith and caring relationships to love, care for, and sustain God’s creation by examining and adopting effective practices and habits.

Vision Statement: We will become a witnessing congregation that respects and honors God’s creation, Earth’s climate, and our neighbors.

This team is known now as the Caretakers of Creation Team will be mostly advisory. They will work with our ministries to consider ways we can better tend the Eden God loves. We should pray for them as they strive to do this alongside the whole people of God.

Slide: Me in creation

Today, even on this hot day, take a minute to revel in the beauty of all that God created. Wisconsin is a beautiful state. Eau Claire is a beautiful city full of rivers, prairie flowers, and sunshine. You are a part of that creation, too. But, perhaps this creation is calling for your attention through God’s Holy Spirit. For, God is still loosed in the world and Eden needs tending again. Amen.

