

“All My Relations”  
An Ecological Reading of Threefold Christian Scripture to imagine faithful action  
in a time of climate crisis.

by Jaime Steiert McGlothlin

March 1, 2024

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William Willimon, DMIN Director

A thesis submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

This Doctor of Ministry thesis seeks to address the misapplication of Christian Scripture and its contribution to the climate crisis in which we find ourselves. Ellen Davis calls the Christian duty to delineate a responsible vision of what participation in the renewal of creation might mean the most essential theological task of this generation. This is but one small offering.

The solution this thesis proposes is the recovery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the story of everything, a metanarrative which holds together God and all God has made. This ecological (relational) reading of Scripture finds all of Holy Scripture and reality to follow a threefold wisdom pattern of Creation/Uncreation/New Creation. Recovery of this lens allows us to name the time we are living in and imagine what faithful ecological participation in the larger story might look like.

The methodology used in this paper is narrative theology. Such a theology is advocated by Kavin Rowe and can also be seen in Richard Hays' reading of New Testament texts as echoes of earlier narratives. NT Wright also suggests the metanarrative of the Resurrection of Christ in framing all ethical action and mission of the Church. Agrarian theological readings of Scripture, such as those offered by Ellen Davis, Wendell Berry, and Norman Wirzba, have also formed my understanding and hearing of Holy Scripture. I also have been shaped by the writing of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, who explores the liturgy of the Church in worship as the great cosmic story; Christ and the Church are offered "for the life of the world."

It is this world which is the theme and concern of this thesis, and which much contemporary Christian theology has left behind. It is time to recover the story of a God who so loved the world to bring heaven down to dwell with us.

For my parents  
in the Texas Panhandle  
and the story they gave me.

*“The ordinary accumulates into glory.”*

Rowan Williams

*“Of what are we witnesses? What have we seen and touched with our hands?”*

Alexander Schmemmann

*“The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.”*

Psalms 24:1, KJV

*“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”*

Psalms 34:8

## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	xi
1. Introduction: Learning our story.....	1
1.1 A troubling story of everything.....	1
1.2 Why stories? The methodology of narrative theology.....	4
1.3 Reclaiming the Christian story of everything .....	5
1.4 Recovering an ecological reading of Scripture and reality.....	8
1.4.1 Overview: Structure and Chapters.....	8

### SECTION ONE: CREATION

2. “In the Beginning” Birthing with God.....	10
2.1 Genesis One: A Birth Story pattern.....	13
2.1.1 Contemplation.....	13
2.1.2 Creation Action.....	14
2.1.3 Examen and Naming.....	16
2.2 “Mastery among” .....	17
2.3 Relationship as Ecology.....	20
2.4 Sabbath.....	22
2.5. Remembering the Birth Story: Other Scriptural Witnesses.....	23
2.5.1 The Psalms.....	24
2.5.1.1 Seeing goodness when all is not right with the world.....	28
2.5.1.2 Providence: A God who will “see to it” .....	29
2.5.2 Other Scriptural voices: A recurring call to see God’s providence in Creation.....	29

SECTION TWO: UNCREATION

3. Seeing Creation Undone.....34

3.1 Seen and unseen: Faithful Christian ecological seeing.....37

3.1.1 Cattle, feedyards, and Wal-Mart (and decimated bison, invisible people, depleted water, and sick soil) .....39

3.1.1.2 Faithful seeing: Engagement with deep memory.....41

3.2 Fall from Connection: Genesis 3.....44

3.2.1 That pesky free will.....45

3.2.2 Choosing a different vision than limits.....47

3.3 False seeing: The Great Temptation of idolatry.....48

4. The Exodus Story: The Creator delivers.....52

4.1 The Exodus delivery.....54

4.1.1 Marks of the Creator.....55

4.1.2 Freedom for fidelity and rest.....56

4.1.3 Exodus: Our continuing story.....58

4.2 The Calling to see: the prophetic task in the meantime.....59

4.2.1 The gift and burden of seeing.....61

NEW CREATION

5. Seeing how to be a human creature: Christology and ecological crisis.....65

5.1 Jesus the prototype.....66

5.1.1 Jesus: The Creator at work.....68

5.1.1.1 The revelation of the flesh.....68

5.1.1.2 Paul and the flesh.....69

5.2 Saved by the faithfulness of the true human.....70

5.3 Creation theology in the Gospels.....71

5.3.1 Creation theology in the Gospel of John.....73



5.3.1.1 Remaining in the one who feeds us.....	74
5.3.1.2 Come and see.....	75
5.3.1.3 Blindness.....	77
5.3.1.4 Jesus the Gardener: the truth in the mistaken identity.....	77
6. Conclusion: The first fruit of a Resurrected Creation...and the meantime.....	82
6.1 Resurrection: the affirmation of flesh and creaturely life.....	82
6.1.1 Imagine Easter.....	84
6.2 Belief in Life before death.....	86
6.2.1 In the meantime: Garden, Cook, and examine expectations.....	87
6.2.1.1 Garden.....	88
6.2.1.2 Cook.....	89
6.2.1.3 Weed expectations, cultivate limits.....	89
6.3 Final thoughts: Crossing over to heaven.....	90
Bibliography.....	92

# 1.INTRODUCTION *Learning our Story....*

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*"I love to tell the story;  
'twill be my theme in glory  
to tell the old, old story  
of Jesus and his love."*

—Annabelle Catherine Hankey

*"To preserve our places and to be at home in them, it is necessary to fill them with imagination. To imagine as well as see what is in them. Not to fill them with the junk of fantasy and unconsciousness, for that is no more than the industrial economy would do, but to see them first clearly with the eyes, and then to see them with the imagination in their sanctity, as belonging to the Creation."*

—Wendell Berry

*"Of what life do we speak, and what life do we preach, proclaim, and announce when, as Christians, we confess that Christ died for the life of the world?"*

—Alexander Schmemmann

## **1.1 A troubling story of everything**

I'm out of breath at the top of the football stadium bleachers. It's 1993. I'm trying to make home in a thirteen-year-old body that is changing on me each morning. Me and my fellow female rejects are being punished in first period Girls' Athletics for being "too slow" (alive, unpopular, and thirteen) by running bleachers at the high school football stadium. I'm wearing the standard-issued polyester maroon gym shorts with elastic waist and the "property of Hereford Jr High" athletics, #3 t-shirt. I never imagined I was "the kind of girl" who would end up in Athletics, but in smalltown Texas, trying out for a sports team is the separating corral for social acceptance. Making it through this cattle chute meant an invitation to sit at the queen bee table in the cafeteria, permission to cut in the snack bar line, and the possibility of hanging out at the elusive Silver Screen Video parking lot on the weekends.

We were the ones who were left behind.

As my calves burn from the climb to the top of this cement temple, I prostrate myself for air that is filled with the smell of cow manure. The high school football stadium bleachers are the highest point of ascension in Hereford, Texas—save a few lonely grain elevators. It is the place we all commonly worship on Friday nights. We might not agree on much else, but we find our common ground on the 50-yard line.

From our vantage point, my friend Monica speaks.

*"Wow, this is how high the blood is going to be!"*

“*What?*” I manage to get out between winded gasps, grabbing the stitch in my side. I suddenly had an image of Missy Warrick throwing up fruit cocktail all over this very high school track after the PE teacher made us all run laps after lunch in elementary school. Don’t be Missy.

“*When the Rapture comes,*” Monica interrupts. “*The horses’ blood is going to be as high as the top of this stadium. Everything is going to burn, all the trees, all the homes, all the people!*”

“*Where’d you get that? Some horror movie?*”

“*Oh no!*” she gleefully responds, “*The Bible says...*”

Monica has been to two years of Wednesday night youth group at the Baptist Church, learning from our 19-year-old youth director who is trying to grow a goatee. This qualifies her as our resident theologian.

I consider all I can see of my small world... the elementary school where children are running on the playground, cattle in nearby feedyards. My grandmother’s oak tree a block away. There is a man walking his dog, thinking it is a normal Tuesday. How silly of him.

I realize that it is not just the running that is making me sick.

“*That’s terrible,*” I say more to myself than to her.

“*Oh, we don’t have to worry,*” Monica consoles me as she pulls contraband Skittles from her gym short pocket. “*We won’t be here. If you are a Christian, you have nothing to worry about. God will take us away to heaven before he destroys it all.*”

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In some ways, what follows is a response to this nauseating episode when I was 13. There, at the high school football stadium, I was told by my friend Monica a “story of everything.” It told who God is, who people are, and the worth of things like oak trees, cattle, natural springs, grasslands, blue jays, and soil. It disclosed the value of these things because it predicted, even celebrated, their impending doom. It told of a world God would throw away and incinerate as casually as we did our used McDonald’s cups under the stands.

This story was not made up by Monica, neither should we blame her too much. My young friend was only telling me a story that was told to her as the story of everything. In this narrative, the Earth is *ours* to use, made for us. We, by God’s design, are masters of this world, commanded to, as Genesis 1:28’s *radab* is often translated, “subdue and conquer.” God himself in the end will engage in this type of conquering by destroying the Earth. To worry about things like where all the plastic is going, the trillions of gallons of water we’re using on landscaping, melting ice caps, elephants, and if our children can survive in a world that is 121 degrees equates to not trusting God. “*Don’t worry, it’s made for us to use*” and “*we’ll not be here anyway*” is the comforting refrain.

The climax of this story is, of course, the Rapture. At a point that we don't know, but we gleefully expect to not be too long a wait, Jesus will come and whisk away those who are Christian to a heaven far away while the rest are left behind for torment and burning.<sup>1</sup>

*Hey, some make the team, and some don't.*

In this story, the final destination for Christians is not here, but elsewhere. Those who “have accepted Jesus” are “just passing through” and one day “will fly away.” Our eternal destiny is heaven. Life is a time of torment, testing, and endurance. The flesh is corrupt, the spirit is what really counts. Basically, we can't wait to die and are willing to help God out with the destruction of the Earth in the meantime.

It is a bad story.

It is bad in its destructiveness, and how it continues to give permission, even blessing, for violence to all that is made. It is bad in its lack of ecology, which I simply define as relationship between creatures, place, and their Creator. It severs and splinters connection, dissecting us from one another and what sustains us, which is the root concept of sin. It is bad in what it says about the present moment, and life itself, and the passive, indifferent, and even hostile, Christianity it has produced. It is also bad because it is, well—*bad news* for the created life, which makes it a distortion of Good News. I have come to call this story by its true name: an *anti-Christ* story.

When I say anti-Christ, I simply mean something that it is the antithesis, the opposite, of Christ as revealed in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. The story of the Gospels reveals a God who “came down,” “who took on flesh,” who pronounced good news of a kingdom of heaven among us, who brought order out of chaos, healing to sickness, extended forgiveness, gave thanks, suffered and died, and was raised bodily from the dead by the Creator God in the central event of all Christian Scripture, the Resurrection.

This is the Christian story, the story of the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus. The Story of the Creator God who, even in the forces of un-creation and death, brings about a new creation. It is so much the story that Christians began to see in this story a “story for everything” a pattern for all that God had done and will do and all of reality. The particulars in the life of Jesus were the cosmic story.

This is the better story we must recover. But first, we must ask an important question: Why stories anyway?

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<sup>1</sup> That the entire Scriptural basis of the Rapture is only found in one verse of Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 4, and is actually a gross misreading of Paul describing Christ's final return to Earth to make things right seems to be missed in the exhilaration of an escape plan. For an extensive take-down of the concept of Rapture and a better reading of 1 Thessalonians 4, see Chapter 8, *When He Appears* in Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

## ***1.2 Why stories? The methodology of narrative theology***

Stories are the way we make meaning of the world. We cannot understand who we are, who those around us are, what it means to live and die, and how we are to live in the meantime, without narrative. Narrative is what connects what would appear seemingly random events together. If we lose our story, life is chaos. If we don't have a story to fill in the blanks and provide connection, life becomes isolated, meaningless episodes. And if we are not provided a story, we will create one. Let me tell you a story to help with this.

When I was 8 years old, my dad took me to the annual summer festival, the Town and Country Jubilee, at the city park in Hereford. There was music, food booths, snow cones, a craft fair, cotton candy, confetti eggs, and balloon darts. It was always a fun day in the community, and I looked forward to its celebration every summer.

On this Jubilee afternoon, Dad and I were leisurely walking through the festivities, taking everything in. An exuberant woman dressed as a clown was singing "I Love Jesus Christ" (a Christianized take on Joan Jett's "I Love Rock and Roll") from a makeshift flatbed truck stage. We enjoyed our homemade Butterfinger (dad) and strawberry (me) ice cream we had picked up at the 4-H booth as we strolled along the worn August grass.

Suddenly, two police officers came up to my dad,

*"Sir, you are under arrest. Please place your hands behind your back."*

They grabbed his arms and took his ice cream. At the time, the fact that they took away his ice cream bothered me more than anything. He loved his ice cream.

I felt hot panic flood my eyes.

I screamed, *"Daddy! No, don't take him away!"*

A crowd was watching. My mind was racing...why was this happening? What had he done? What was the secret I didn't know? Would I see him again? What would happen to me? Did Mom know?

My dad shook his hands loose, *"Get your hands off of me, I'm not doing this today."*

What was happening now? Was he resisting arrest? Would that get him in more trouble? The police officers suddenly let go of him, backed away, and sheepishly grinned at one another. One of them handed him back his Styrofoam cup of ice cream.

*"Ok, Jim. Guess not today."*

My red-faced dad looked down in his cup of Butterfinger swirl.

*"That ruined my ice cream."*

*“Daddy, what happened? Why are you being arrested?”*

It was then that my dad told me the story. The whole arrest was part of a fundraiser that a local charity was conducting. To raise money, they were “arresting” certain community members during the summer festival. They got real policemen—in uniform no less—to help. They would take the fake felons “to jail”—a fenced in area at the side of the park, until some other community member donated to charity to “pay their bail.” The only problem with this was that I did not know that story. Hearing the story would have given me a sense of security in knowing what was happening instead of the many narratives I needed to entertain to make any sense out of life. My mind was frantically trying to connect the pieces and read the situation and create a story when one was not provided. Without stories, life events are random, disconnected, and can be terrorizing. We are living in such an episodic, frantic, confusing world now because of not having a communal narrative.

What is true in microcosm is true for the whole. We are a world who has lost our story.

Jerome Berryman is an Episcopalian priest and the creator of *Godly Play*, a method of engaging children in the language and stories of Christian Scripture based on the pedagogy of Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti. Berryman worked as a Chaplain to children and provided family systems therapy as part of an interdisciplinary team to children who were suicidal during his many years at the Houston Child Guidance Center. The team researched commonalities in the families where children were trying to kill themselves. There was one consistency in the data: families with a suicidal child did not tell stories. Berryman expands, “Their communication was reduced to commands, demands, exclamations, brief explanations, and questions requiring short factual answers. The family members were like neighboring islands without any bridges. There was no narrative to connect them.”<sup>2</sup>

When we do not have a narrative—or when we have been given a bad narrative—we are lost, confused, despondent, and despairing. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr describes our world as “starving for meaning” and calls the lack of a shared sense of meaning the crisis of our lifetimes.<sup>3</sup> In short, we cannot engage in any meaning-making reflection or ethical action without stories. We need a “given” story that both includes and transcends our individual living. We need a story cosmic in nature, that reveals who we are, *who and what everything else is*, and how we are called to live in our lifespan.

Thankfully, we have one.

### ***1.3 Reclaiming the Christian story of everything***

C. Kavin Rowe, George Washington Ivey Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity school describes Christianity as “the story of everything.” In his highly accessible

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<sup>2</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder*, Revised Edition ed. (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2020).

book on Christian narrative theology and anthropology, *Christianity's Surprise, A Sure and Certain Hope*, Rowe shares, when you tell a story about God you are telling a story about everything. The story of everything answers questions about origin and end, and thus, as it turns out, of purpose in the present and hope for the future.<sup>4</sup>

What does this have to do with ecological crisis? Well, if Christianity is “the story of everything”—every person, animal, tree, place and the maker of all things seen and unseen—turns out everything as well.

Ellen Davis is the Amos Ragan Kearns Distinguished Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School and a forerunner in the field of ecotheology. Her book, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* helps return us to our genesis story of creatures made by a Creator and provides both a critique of our current industrialized agricultural model and food production as well as a way to imagine a faithful return to life-sustaining patterns. Davis calls offering “a responsible vision for the renewal of creation the most important theological task of this generation.”<sup>5</sup> I both agree with her and know my life must be about telling a better story. It is why I am a pastor and why I offer this writing. For this work to be theological, it must root the current ecological crisis in the Christian Narrative. In other words, the theological task must be ecological in connecting the present reality of the world to the Creator God, the Incarnation of Christ Jesus, and the future hope of the Resurrection. The metanarrative is the task. The God revealed in Scripture as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the main character. The Christian faith is cosmic because the Creator made the world and Christ was sent for the life of the world and the Spirit is sustaining life in this world. But that does not equate to a loose universalism. As we shall soon see, it plays out in granular, local, humble ways and demands a radical repentance—changing of allegiances, from one story to another.

The story of everything is that God raised the Crucified Christ. Our creeds carefully affirm a bodily resurrection and the return of Christ as Judge to this earth. The final vision of Revelation is of heaven coming down to earth. To say it succinctly, all Christian Scripture is a story of God coming to dwell here.

This brings us to what is often a startling statement to the contemporary church, but no less, a much more biblical assertion than the anemic, disembodied, human-centric current emphasis on heaven elsewhere. It's always been *here* God is concerned with. What I mean by “here” is from Genesis 1 to Revelation 21, the story of Christian Scripture is of God who creates this world *here* and called it good, gave the Christ in flesh to dwell with us *here*, raised the body of Jesus as a first fruit of what is to come for the world, and sends the Spirit to keep the world in grace until that final resurrection is consummated *here*. God's purposes—from beginning to end—is the life of the world *here*. Those purposes are best described by the simple preposition

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<sup>4</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.

the Nicene Creed uses repeatedly: *for*.<sup>6</sup> “*For* us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. *For* our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.” Schmemmann’s elegantly recaps the Christian sacramental story that God’s giving is “for the life of the world.” There is only one appropriate word for this self-giving on behalf of another: Love. “Love was his meaning” reflects Julian of Norwich.<sup>7</sup> The love of God is seen in God’s deep commitment to creating, redeeming and sustaining the world. Christian Scripture has always been—and must continue to be—told as a love story between God and what God creates.

What is called for is no less than a transformation of our relationship with the world which requires a fundamentally different way of seeing in love. It requires an essentially better story, one that is more Scriptural, more embodied, more Christ-like.

Most blessedly, we’ve been given that story. As every storyteller will tell you, a story must have three parts: a beginning, middle and end. Stories make reality ecological by providing connection and movement. That is where we find meaning. What is needed is a recovery of the three-fold Christian story, of the broader arc and pattern of all Holy Scripture. At its essence, in its clearest and supreme form, this pattern is seen in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rowe offers, “we learn from the Christian narrative how to name the time we are living in...Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection in the key to the pattern of the story of everything.”<sup>8</sup> This is often referred to as the Paschal Mystery, the way of seeing and interpreting all of life from the “point of standing” of the Christ event.

LIFE	DEATH	RESURRECTION
The threefold pattern is elsewhere:		
GOODNESS	FALL	REDEMPTION
GARDEN	BANISHMENT	PARADISE
CREATION	UNCREATION	NEW CREATION
CONSTRUCTION	DECONSTRUCTION	RECONSTRUCTION
NAIVETE	COMPLEXITY	SECOND NAIVETE
ORIENTATION	DISORIENTATION	REORIENTATION

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams speaks to such when he roots God being completely trustworthy in God having no self-interest or anything to gain in creating; God has no “need” for us so God’s motives can be trusted. Williams points us to the Nicene Creed, and the language of “for.” Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust, an Introduction to Christian Belief* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love* as quoted by Rowan Williams, Williams, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Rowe, 24.



This threefold story is the pattern of all of life. As Rohr notes, we see this perennial tradition in the changing of the seasons and the rhythms of created life. We live it in the cycle of time of the Church year marking our time within the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. It describes reality. It is trinitarian. It avoids dualism. It begins with the goodness of created life, acknowledges the realness of the second stage of sin, death, and suffering, without letting us fall into despair or meaninglessness because this stage is not the end of the story. God is forever doing a new thing, giving reason to hope.

This is a story and a hope we need more than ever. We need to see this story not only in reading our Holy Scriptures, but in how we “read” the story of our lives. It helps us imagine new possibility even in the midst of suffering and death. It helps us locate our place in the story and trust that something new can break through. It reflects the energy of movement and possibility in our story. It gives a sense of meaning, commonality, and belonging in a time when we often feel fragmented, isolated, and meaninglessness. It provides safety and imagination in what Rohr describes as a seemingly “scary and disenchanting world.”

### ***1.4 Recovering an ecological reading of Scripture and reality***

It is time to recover our better Christian narrative. I write this thesis to recover an ecological reading of Christian Scripture. By ecological, I mean communal and relational between God and all God has made. I also mean ecological as an offering of a vision of order for the flourishing of all creaturely life. Orthodox priest and theologian Alexander Schmemmann beautifully expresses the ecology that faith offers in the title as well as the content as his book: Christ is offered *For the life of the world*. It is only a story that is both deeply contextual, particular, contemplative, and solitary as well as cosmic, inclusive, active and communal that can save us. As part of the body of professing Christians, I believe this story is the hope of the world and all its creatures, not just human life. The Christian narrative offers all this. This is the world’s salvation story.

#### **1.4.1 Overview: Structure and Chapters**

I have structured this thesis in three parts that refer to the three stages of the wisdom pattern. I am calling these three main parts CREATION UNCREATION and NEW CREATION reflecting the ecological lens of the book. I have chosen to engage what I believe to be the three great stories of our faith: The Creation (Chapter 2) and Fall (Chapter 3), Exodus event from Egypt (Chapter 4), and the life death and resurrection of Jesus (Chapter 5) from an ecological reading of the threefold pattern. Each of these stories contains and repeats this pattern. I support this with examinations of the Psalms and Prophets (Chapter 2), as well as bringing in Pauline reflection on the cosmic Christ, Resurrection, and life in the Spirit to round out my hermeneutic (Chapters 5 and 6). Woven throughout my chapters are personal stories and my own imaginings of a more faithful way of seeing and living. An incarnational faith should put flesh on theological concepts and root them in lived experience in particular place. This is an attempt to do so.

My final chapter (Chapter 6) seeks to affirm our future vision, the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection and redemption of the world God loves while offering imaginations of what faithful living in the meantime might look like. This is the “already and not yet” tension of a life caught up in the story of Christ.

The Lakota phrase “Mitakuye Oyasin” means “all are related.” Within this phrase, we can hear the relational core our Holy Scriptures, of God and all that God has made. The hope is that in returning to a relational lens and larger narrative patterns in reading Holy Scripture, we might rediscover and continue to engage a story that fuels our imaginations for faithful response to the disorder we find ourselves in and gives us hope for new creation along the way.

## 2. CHAPTER ONE

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### *“In the Beginning” Birthing with God.*

*“Genesis One announces the deepest mystery: God wills and will have a faithful relation with earth. Genesis One invites the listening community to celebrate that reality. The binding is irreversible. God has decided it. The connection cannot be nullified.”* —Walter Brueggemann

*“They didn’t have you where I come from  
Never knew the best was yet to come  
Life began when I saw your face,  
And I hear your laughter like a serenade,  
How long do you want to be loved? Is forever enough?  
‘Cause I’m never never giving you up.”* —Lullaby, The Chicks

It began at two in the morning.

At least, that is when I think labor began, but being my first child, I had no clue what labor even felt like. I was a member of the uninitiated. That day I had officiated a graveside, painted the bathroom green, completed a jigsaw puzzle, and opened the door to several friends bearing ice cream. When you are a week overdue in August in Texas, all people know to do for a pregnant lady is bring her ice cream and let her paint the bathroom.

The mark that this might in fact be the real deal was the rhythm of it. Creation always has a rhythm. Remembering foggily the directions in childbirth class to time the contractions, I realized I owned no watch with a second hand. I focused on the blinking green numbers on the microwave we used for popcorn and instant oatmeal instead. The twisting of my abdomen kept a steady beat: 2:04 a.m.....2:08 a.m.....2:12 a.m..... every four minutes by the clock.

*“The time came for her to give birth.”* (Lk 2:6)

I decided to take a shower, an indulgent one. I pumiced and buffed, lathered, and combed conditioner through every strand of hair. I took time to consider the new alien features of my body: thick hair, long nails, a missing bellybutton. I wanted to bask in the last moments of control and freedom I had been warned I would never experience again. *“This will change everything”* .... *“You just can’t be prepared.”* ... *“You will never sleep again.”* Hearing other parents talk might be the best form of birth control. So, if these next few hours were “it” before the world as I knew it ended, I might at least enjoy the last rite of a long shower.

But there was more to it. I wanted to be fully in this body which I had shared with another for nine months. I hadn’t seen my feet since Easter. My body was eclipsed by another. There was a sacredness to this, and a grief in pending delivery. This would be the first of many goodbyes.

There is an original blessedness to pregnancy: To feel the calm that your child is safe and secure. To know where she is. To feel her every movement. To not have to share her with a world that can be mean. I used the good fluffy guest towels and massaged lotion all over my body. It was an anointing. It would not always be like this.

Fresh out of the shower, I went outside. It stays perpetually hot and muggy in Central Texas, even at 3 a.m. But it was quiet. No clouds. And stars.

*“The Lord brought Abram outside and said ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. As many as there are stars in the sky, so shall your descendants be.’”* (Gn 15:5)

I don’t know about all that, but that day I would become a mother. That day I would see my child’s face.

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I woke Andy. We loaded the brown Oldsmobile Intrigue with the pre-packed bag and bumpy (newborn lexicon: nursing pillow). We had practiced several trial runs to the hospital, not wanting to miss the exit. Time seemed of the essence. Little did we know the eons of time in birthing life.

There were dead crickets everywhere in Waco that August resembling an Egyptian plague. They littered the newly built Hillcrest Women’s and Children’s parking lot and crunched beneath our feet. I shuffled excitedly through the whirl of the sliding glass doors, assaulted by the frigid air and fluorescent lighting. There were pictures of smiling babies with marble eyes everywhere. Mine would be cuter.

I waddled up to a middle-aged woman with red permed hair and blue eyeliner manning the night desk of Labor & Delivery. She tapped her hot pink acrylic nails on Tom Cruise’s face on her *US Weekly*, chewing her gum indifferently. With a smile and delight I announced, *“I am in labor, and I am here to have my baby.”*

She looked over her readers, leaned her head forward, taking me in from head to toe. *“Sure you are,”* she replied returning to her magazine. *“Have a seat.”*

Time gets screwy when you are in labor. You wait and wait for things to progress.

It would be nine hours before I would see my baby’s face.

Looking back, maybe this child came to be the first moment I imagined what she might look like...*would she get my husband’s red hair, my blue eyes? Would she love the written word like the journalists in my family? Would she have the Pittman almond-shaped eyes? Could she avoid the dreaded Steiert nose?* There were many contemplations of who she would be and how she would carry the genes of our ancestors onward. But none of the imagining could prepare for the reality of seeing her

strawberry blonde hair, her long fingernails and downy skin, of her craning her neck toward the light her wide eyes taking in the world.

*“I see your face.”*

It was the one moment in life that lived up to all the hype.

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In the beginning, we struggle to see. You cannot be human without beginning the journey blind. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, an infant’s eyesight is said to be “poor” with little ability to focus beyond six-to-ten inches. Even so, faces are how babies learn to see and their favorite visual stimulation. We literally learn to see by seeing someone look at us.<sup>1</sup>

The first object we learn is our mother’s face. We don’t yet know the difference between her body and our own. Our parent will be our first mirror, allowing us to see who we are—whether we are valued and whether our needs will be met.

If this initial seeing goes well—that is to say, if we are seen as beloved and named as good—chances are good that the foundation of our life will be trust, both trust in the world and other and trust in our own worthiness and value. It all comes from an exterior gaze.<sup>2</sup>

This is the story of faith. In the beginning we *are* seen. Seen and named by others. The story we find ourselves in is a story where we, *along with creatures and places*, are first seen by our Parent God as beloved and named as good.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many outstanding resources on the wonder of early childhood visual development, including: [aoa.org](http://aoa.org) (American Optometric Association) and [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org) (American Academy of Pediatrics).

<sup>2</sup> There is much developmental psychology insisting on the critical importance of the first few years of life in building a steady foundation. Erik Erikson speaks of trust vs. mistrust of being the foundational question of infancy. Am I safe? Will my needs be met? See Dorothy Corkille Briggs, *Your Child's Self-Esteem: The Key to His Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1970., 1970). Fred Rogers, also an ordained Presbyterian Minister, experienced a call from God to work through the medium of television to care for children. His reasoning? Too many children were being put in front of the tv screen young, and if he could replicate the up-close gaze and gentle voice of a mother feeding her child through the medium of television, he could build a solid foundation of worth for a lifetime. Though adults might easily chide Roger’s tone of speaking, close camera angles, and frequent song, every word, tone, and angle were highly intentional and rooted in developmental theory of the importance of the child being seen and nurtured as the solid foundation of life. See Terry Gross’ 1985 interview: <https://freshairarchive.org/guests/fred-rogers>.

## 2.1 Genesis One: A Birth Story pattern

*“When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was water and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day.”*

—Gn 1:1-4a, translation Robert Alter

Genesis 1 reveals a pattern: God creates, *and enters into*, a rhythm of contemplation, action, examining, naming, and rest. This is the established pattern for creatures in the divine image, a cadence of life that is given for creaturely living, flourishing, and imagining.<sup>3</sup>

Let us look at each of these:

### 2.1.1 Contemplation

In the beginning, the Spirit of God (*râchaph*) sweeps over darkness, nothingness, and chaos. The Hebrew word *râchaph*, often translated hovering or brooding, also means “to grow soft, relax.” As Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Alter reveals, *râchaph* is the same verb in Deut. 32:11 for an eagle hovering over her young and has a connotation of nurture and parturition.<sup>4</sup> It is a state of “constant fluttering, trembling, quivering.”<sup>5</sup> God is in labor ready to give birth.

What if we were to call this softening preparation—this attentive labor, by another word: contemplation?<sup>6</sup> Contemplation is, as Rowan Williams guides us, to be “utterly attentive,” to

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen Davis in particular highlights the way “the text speaks to and for the imagination.” Davis, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: New York : W.W. Norton, c1996., 1996), 3.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT, *râchaph* in Genesis 1:2 in the Piel stem. The verb is found in only two other places in the Old Testament, and only one other place—Deuteronomy 32:11—in the Piel stem. Deuteronomy 32:11, “*As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions*” speaks to God creating the nation of Israel. Old Testament theologian Dennis Tucker speaks to the connection between the Genesis and Deuteronomy text: “In both texts, God is hovering over that which is becoming, over that which God is bringing into being. In Deuteronomy, it is the image of the mother eagle hovering over its young (32:11a) and then “bearing them aloft” (32:11b) followed by guiding them (32:12). The mother eagle hovers over/broods over that which is hers and she brings them to life. In Genesis 1:2, God hovers over that which belongs to him but has yet to come into being fully.” Dennis Tucker, Thoughts on Translation of RâChaph in Gn 1:2, December 7, 2023, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> I first was exposed to the idea of seeing Genesis 1 as God’s established order of action flowing from contemplation in a podcast discussion on sabbatical between Andy Crouch and Ruth Haley Barton. Andy Crouch speaks of a human rhythm of contemplation, action, Examen, and rest being patterned after God’s own established way of being in Genesis One. Ruth Haley Barton, “Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership,” January 31, 2023, 2023, in *Are You Willing to Quit Your Job: Sabbatical for the Rest of Us, Sabbatical Season 18*, <https://ruthhaleybarton.podbean.com/e/season-18-episode-4-are-you-willing-to-quit-your-job-sabbatical-for-the-rest-of-us/>. The idea is not original to Crouch, however. In her book, *Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Ellen Davis relies on a contemplative lens in the reading of the Priestly Account as we strive to “see with God.” She emphasizes how we are given a unique and incredible vantage point in Genesis 1 in going in the eyes of God to see. Davis, 46. When contemplation is translated as “being within the

have “a will and an imagination turned Godward.”<sup>7</sup> Contemplation is awareness of the source of Being.

Thomas Merton reflects:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life...It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that source.<sup>8</sup>

Simone Weil describes contemplation as “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.”<sup>9</sup> Weil emphasizes that the end—the fruit—of this contemplation is a life of love of God and other creatures. Julian of Norwich summed up her ecstatic visions with the statement “love was his meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

Love is not sentimental, and neither is contemplation. Contemplation will result in getting our hands dirty, hearing the cry of the needy, seeing suffering, and speaking truth even at personal cost. Contemplation births creative action.

### **2.1.2 Creative Action**

The fruit of contemplation is active and proper loving engagement in the world. To be true loving contemplation, it must produce what Paul describes as “fruit” of the Spirit. It is, as the 1976 hard rock band Boston sings “more than a feeling.” Love is, as the great theologian-in-a-black-hat Clint Black sings, “something that we do.”

One can see this in the writings *but more so the life* of the greatest teacher of contemplation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Thomas Merton. Merton considered all reality to flow from the seed of contemplation. Merton’s diverse and engaged involvement in what might first be considered far-flung issues: civil rights, nuclear disarmament, ancient cultures, monastic life, peace, war—were simply truly seeing God in creaturely life. Contemplation guides us towards our “right

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Temple (of thoughts and perspective), the First Creation Account amazingly invites us into God’s own Temple, or way of seeing. We, like the Spirit of God, are invited to hover over Creation in contemplation with and like God.

<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams reflecting on the life of Thomas Merton. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, Kentucky: FONS VITAE, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Conn.: [Norfolk, Conn.] : New Directions, 1972, c1961., 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*.

<sup>10</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love* as quoted by Rowan Williams, Williams, 10.

place in the Creation.”<sup>11</sup> As Merton describes, one who contemplates “does not merely think, (s)he also loves.”<sup>12</sup> In true contemplation, the mind falls into the heart.

Love in contemplation is utter attention. It is to give our full undivided presence. A fitting image for the presence of God among the Creation, often called forth in Scripture, is clouds settling on a high mountain, or a Temple filled with smoke, or the back-and-forth fluttering of a mother eagle over the nest in Gen 1:2 and Deut 32:11. It is a settling and falling of our attention over another.

Contemplation is the necessary seed of right action. As we examine Merton, contemplation allowed him to see in the middle of an ordinary day on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville that people were “walking around shining like the sun.” This moment, captured in Merton’s *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, was a turning point of greater social action in the world. It allowed him to take bold political stances, such as his support of the non-violent civil rights movement which he called “certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States” and to speak boldly of the danger of nuclear weapons to the Creation.<sup>13</sup> Faithful creaturely action bloomed from the seed of seeing reality and the exquisite beauty of creaturely life through contemplation.

To say it differently, from contemplation arises true vocation, the work we are given to do.

Merton writes:

Contemplation is the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One. He answers Himself in us and this answer is divine life, divine creativity, making all things new. We ourselves become His echo and His answer. It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time, question and answer. And all is summed up in one awareness-not a proposition, but an experience: "I Am."

Contemplation is to both hear a call from God and to be the answer. Contemplation puts us in the flow of God’s on-going creative action.

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<sup>11</sup> As quoted by the New York Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society. Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative," Thomas Merton NYC, accessed October 15, 2023, 2023, <https://www.thomasmertonnyc.org/about-merton/explore/2016/7/5/the-contemplative>.

<sup>12</sup> Merton, "The Contemplative."

<sup>13</sup> Merton, "The Contemplative."



Proper action arises from this settling and hovering, this contemplation within Creation. The state of contemplation is generative. In Genesis 1, God's contemplation births the creation of light, the separation of darkness from light, evening and morning, waters above from waters below, land, sea, grass, seed and fruit yielding plants and trees, sun, moon and stars, creatures of sea and sky, creatures to fill the land, and human creatures in the divine image. God creates order, meaning, and sustaining relationship.

### 2.1.3 Examen and Naming

After giving birth to the Creation, God examines the Creation.

Which is to say, God sees. *God takes time and space for full attention.* God our Creator, our Parent, beholds us in the moment of birth. Then God pronounces good. Davis suggests, "The goodness of the world is presented not as simple fact, nor even as an authoritative pronouncement, but as a divine perception."<sup>14</sup> This is how God sees. And what God announces while beholding the face of creation is:

*"It is beautiful."*

Davis is guiding us to see that we are not merely told what God did or said but invited to see the cosmos through God's eyes. Christians are those called to "see as God sees", which means pronouncing goodness.

Davis continues:

Genesis 1 is giving form to a certain way of seeing the world, and accurate perception provides an entrée to active participation in the order of creation. Deep contemplation issues in a renewal of mind and therefore necessarily in new patterns of action.<sup>15</sup>

How we see determines what we do.

What we are given to see in Genesis 1 is the language of poetry which slows us down and brings us into the realm of contemplating goodness and beauty. Much more than a record of "how it began", the text invites us into the realm of awe and wonder at the sacred. It takes us to the moment of birth where the child is named. To name creation correctly is to say, "It is sacred, it is beautiful, it is good."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, 43.

<sup>16</sup> God properly names every creation and in so doing, bestows meaning and value. Out of this dignity and worth, God calls forth action of the creation: Human creatures, in the image of God, are called and invited to this sacred work of examining and naming (see Gn 2:18). The most intimate of acts is to name a creature. "To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it, to know it as coming from God and to know its place and function within the cosmos created by God." Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy, St. Vladimir's Classics Series* (Yonkers, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 21. Wirzba continues:

Wendell Berry agrees:

The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known than it is?<sup>17</sup>

Berry brings several matters into focus here. The Bible reveals a God who created the world and called it good. But this is not just a matter of “for the Bible tells me so.” There is something within the human creature made in the image of God that knows this through wonder. Not “all the time” as Berry qualifies. There are many days where sunrises, sunsets, stars, birds, clouds, lightning and indeed humans around us are mere background scenery or even annoyances for our one-woman plays. But there are moments when we lose ourselves in the wonder of another. This is the same language we use for “falling in love.” In contemplative teaching, it is when the head falls into the heart. It is a moment Merton describes as self-forgetfulness. There is something that is lost, that falls away as we become fully attentive. Words like *wonder, awe, and beauty* are indications we are in the realm of contemplative examination. We are seeing the goodness of Creation, creaturely life, and thus the Creator.

Genesis calls us again and again to this contemplative gaze. We are to see the world in this way: Birthed from the Creator and intimately connected to place and other creatures. From this revealed way of seeing, human creatures can then engage in proper action.

## 2.2 “Mastery among”

And what is the work of humanity in the image of God? Our work is to be fruitful and multiply *along with seeds, fish, and animals*. If we sever our ties as *part of* and trade this relationality for “lords over,” we miss seeing—and acting—correctly. It is a violation of the design and commands if, as Davis notes, *it is only humans increasing in number*.<sup>18</sup> If the multiplication and lordship of humanity undoes (or makes impossible) the prior blessing of creatures or the earth, we have violated God’s blessing.<sup>19</sup> The work of care humanity is called to, often translated “dominate” is better translated “to shepherd” creation.<sup>20</sup> This translation denotes an intimate

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To name some particular thing or place is not only to know something about it but also to position oneself with respect to it in specific ways...if the aim is for you to be loved and cared for, and for others to live in sympathetic and nurturing ways with you, then the specificity of who you are matters all the more. Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 30-32.

As a child, I was taught that the most beautiful sound to a person is you saying their name. Naming is an act of love.

<sup>17</sup> Wendell Berry, *Essays 1993-2017* (New York, N.Y.: New York, N.Y.: The Library of America, [2019], 2019), 32. <https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE009126906>.

<sup>18</sup> With thanks to Ellen Davis’ wise noting of this. Davis, 54.

<sup>19</sup> As discussed between Ellen Davis and her former student, Krista Tippett.

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1190. as referenced in Davis, 55.

loving relationship between creatures. This is not the toiling work that is the consequence of sin (more to that in Chapter 2) but part of God's blessing on the relationship between creatures of the earth. Too often this divine call is twisted and maligned in translation to "dominate and subdue".<sup>21</sup> It is a misinterpretation that does violence. Davis argues that a better translation is "to have skilled mastery among the creatures."

*And God blessed them and said to them:*

*"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and conquer it [v.ekib.s̄ub̄a]  
and exercise mastery among [r.ed'u b-] the fish of the sea and among the  
birds of the sky  
and among every animal that creeps on the earth." (1:28)*

This changes the concept of mastery to something more akin to art.<sup>22</sup> And the nature of artistry is technical knowledge and submission to a medium on the journey of mastery *for love of the creating.*

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The baby I spoke of in the opening of the chapter continues her genesis. We gave her the name, "Olivia", which means "peace." And indeed, her life has created peace in this world. In the image of God, the created becomes a creator. A beautiful part of this growth has been her developing into a musician.

When Olivia entered the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, we dutifully attended a meeting with the high school band director to "try out instruments." The trick of this process is to see if a kid feels a natural connection to a musical instrument and has some degree of knack. Like her mother, the poor child could not tap her hands and feet in a separate rhythm, eliminating the possibility of anyone from our gene pool being cool enough for percussion. Her grandfather and father, both trumpet players, were trying to exhibit self-restraint as the band director dipped different brass mouthpieces in alcohol. But she didn't like buzzing into mouthpieces and had a pained look on her face.

But something different happened when a light, silver tube was placed in her hands. Her body both relaxed and stood at attention. The band director's eyes widened as a sound came out of the end. A smile came across her face. Olivia would play the flute.

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<sup>21</sup> Edwin Good highlights a problematic point in the text: "Only the humans are also told to 'fill the earth and subdue it' and dominate the other living beings. Now, that raises some problems. Subdue is an extremely strong verb, meaning to make others subservient, to subjugate them, even, in a couple of places elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, to violate or rape them. It sometimes seems as if in the modern day some of us humans have set out to follow this command to the letter." Edwin Good, and Edwin Good, *Genesis 1-11 : Tales of the Earliest World* (Redwood City, UNITED STATES: Stanford University Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen Davis, "Wendell Berry and Ellen Davis the Art of Being Creatures," interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, 2010, National Public Radio.

Olivia is—in every sense—a student of the flute. She desires mastery of it. Mastery, as defined by Sarah Lewis, is a constant pursuit.<sup>23</sup> Mastery requires a submission to the instrument. The journey must include knowing the technical aspects: The flute contains airways that can be closed with keys to change the pitch of the note. By varying the air pressure, a flautist can also alter the pitch by causing the air in the flute to resonate at a harmonic rather than the fundamental frequency without opening or closing any of the holes. Faster breath means a higher note. A flute can cover three octaves and is pitched in the key of C; fluctuations in temperature will change this pitch. Olivia had to master—discipline—her own body to produce the best music on her instrument. She has learned breath patterns such as diaphragmatic breathing, circular breathing, and the physiological sigh. She has—through curiosity and failure—discovered the tensing of her abdomen that produces a vibrato sound.

There is care for both the instrument's body as well as her own for mastery. As Olivia prepares to play the flute for a recital, she breathes deeply to help her manage her own anxiety and find calm, to give the best performance on the flute. She has also learned what the instrument needs to play at its best. (Silver cleaner is a no-no, alcohol is o.k., but a soft cloth is the best. Sugar in her saliva from bubble gum or candy can jam up the keys, so best to not have these or at least brush your teeth before playing). The small things matter.

She also has needed to work at other musical components: Counting and rhythm, understanding expression and phrasing, dynamics and considering lyrics, posture and meditation. All of these are essential that she and the flute might create something beautiful together.

Olivia has learned that a daily discipline of practice is the road of mastery. Mastery is a journey and not a particular end.

And she has named her flute: Silvia. Recently, Silvia got dropped on the floor while carrying a backpack and toast in the morning rush, resulting in an injury to the A flat key. Olivia had to play on the school's "Frankenflute" (a combination of several abandoned junior high flutes' body parts). During Sylvia's convalescence, Olivia played a different flute likely more expensive than hers. But Olivia did not care for a different instrument, even one deemed "a higher quality" than hers. Olivia protested every day, constantly asking "where is *my* flute?" There was a partnership that had formed over hours in the band hall, bleachers, auditorium, and bedroom practicing. We grow in intimacy and love of that to which we are connected.

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<sup>23</sup> One of the best books I have read in the last few years on creativity and the stark difference between pursuing success and the journey of mastery. "Mastery requires endurance. Mastery, a word we don't use often, is not the equivalent of what we might consider its cognate—perfectionism—an inhuman aim motivated by a concern with how others view us. Mastery is also not the same as success—an event-based victory based on a peak point, a punctuated moment in time. Mastery is not merely a commitment to a goal, but to a curved-line, constant pursuit." Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, *The Rise : Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery* (New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2014., 2014).

All of this comes in play in the beauty and artistry of her performing. She is on the journey of mastery of the flute because of her loving submission to the instrument. As she recently took a bow after a beautiful performance of *Etude #9*, I looked at my husband....

*“Can you believe we made her?”*

Might this be an insight for us into humanity’s call to mastery among creatures? There is submission<sup>24</sup> that is required, in understanding technical details, to a knowledge that can only come with time. There is intimacy, a daily rhythm of practice and partnership that leads to “mastery among.” As Diana Butler Bass reflects in her book *Grounded*, Intimacy is at the heart of Creation, intimacy between God and the world, Creator and creatures.<sup>25</sup>

This loving intimacy between God and Creation is not a one-time occurrence in the past,<sup>26</sup> but the on-going *relational* nature of God that sustains all life. It is, a *creatio continua*.<sup>27</sup> To bring it home to our ordinary lives, it is not the moment of birth alone where we contemplate with wonder the life of a child, or alone when we affirm her goodness. And a relationship with that child is created and sustained through time and lived experience.

The opposite is also true, the child looks to the parent to grow into the fullness of herself. The created will continue to look toward the Creator to learn to be a creature. To know how to be a proper creature, we look to God. To know what the Creator is like, we contemplate the creation. Thomas Aquinas explains that creation is not a theory as to how things started; it’s a way of seeing “everything in relation to God.”<sup>28</sup> Confessing that God is Creator means confessing God’s committed relationship to the flourishing of all creatures.

### ***2.3 Relationship as ecology***

Relationship is at the heart of confessing that God is Creator. Walter Brueggemann argues that the single sentence, “*Creator creates creation*” is decisive for everything.<sup>29</sup> This is the relational grammar of a (proper) Christian theological world view.

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<sup>24</sup> God in Christ is our example of mastery, that to be the Master of the cosmos, he humbly submitted to the cosmos. In the words of Philippians 2, being in equality to God, he took the form of a servant and self-emptied. We will explore deeper the revelation of the proper creature as revealed in Christ in Chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World; a Spiritual Revolution* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 152-55.

<sup>26</sup> Deists believed that God is like a clockmaker, essentially winding up time at a fixed point in the past and then removing Godself for human history to tick. This is far from the Christian vision of our relational, Trinitarian God’s work of Creation including the Redemption and Sustaining of all created life.

<sup>27</sup> Old Testament scholar Dennis Tucker highlights the Old Testament witness to God continuing to create. We see this especially in Isaiah 40-55 where creation images are invoked again and again.

<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams summing Aquinas, Williams, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis : A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: Atlanta : John Knox Press, c1982., 1982), 17.

Berry adds to this:

Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God. Creation is thus God's presence in creatures.<sup>30</sup>

Davis also highlights the relational nature of the material world: "Already in the first chapter of the Priestly work, one can discern that the form of human life is fundamentally ecological; understanding 'ecology,' with Aldo Leopold, as 'the science of relationships.'"<sup>31</sup>

Richard Rohr points out that the medieval theological language for ecology was "the great chain of being."<sup>32</sup> It was a way of teaching and preserving all things that participate in the Divine Being. This is the heart of why ecology must be a theological matter. Creation proceeds from the Creator. Relational is not an adjective to describe God as much as who God is and what God does. God's identity as Creator and work of world-building are not merely actions in the past but ongoing relationship in the present.

As Williams describes, creation is going on now:

For God to create is for God to commit his action, his life, to sustaining a reality that is different from him, and doing so without interruption. It means that each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we've ever thought about it.<sup>33</sup>

Williams' conclusion is staggering: Relationship with the Creator is not a matter of human will, but as given as the relationship we have with the father and mother who gave us life.

Key to seeing this relational nature—and the key to a proper ecology—is abandoning a human-centered view of the world. Before humanity is even around on the scene, day and night and seasons and birds and fish and mammals all have a relationship with God. The first blessing of the Bible is not for humanity, but for other creatures.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, place is also blessed first. Plains and pastures, lakes and mountains, desert and vista, tundra glaciers and ocean are not background scenery to the real human drama playing out on the stage—they *are* the story. Place matters. Land and water—and order between them—are God's first creation. We must begin here, always with place. And, as Wirzba leads us, have a granular understanding of our places. As Wirzba continues, "until we come into the presence of *where* we are, we will lack sustained reflection on *who* we are."<sup>35</sup> In other words, we must get over ourselves.

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<sup>30</sup> Berry, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Rohr, "A New Cosmology: Nature as the First Bible," 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, 34-35.

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Wirzba, 6.

Rohr, expanding on the teaching of Bonaventure, says:

Creation was not just a warm-up act for the human story. The natural world is its own good (and sufficient) story, if we can only learn to *see with humility and love* [emphasis mine]. That takes contemplative practice, stopping our busy and superficial minds love enough to *see the beauty, allow the truth and protect the inherent goodness* of what is, whether it profits or pleases us or not.<sup>36</sup>

Creation might be incomplete without humans, but that is far from synonymous with humanity having the only value in creation or the only relationship with God. There is more continuity between humans and the rest of creation than distinctiveness. We are part of the creation, made to be in relationship and blessed *as well* as birds, sea creatures and mammals. Recognizing the inherent value of the creation without humanity translates into salvation for other creatures. They are not mere instruments—means of human ends. They have a relationship with God. (cf. Colossians 1:15-20)

As Davis emphasizes, this is the context in which humans are placed, within this web of relationship, creatures among other creatures. This is our order. Violation of this context of blessedness will result in chaos and disorder for the cosmos.<sup>37</sup>

## **2.4 Sabbath**

The way God gives to remember this sacredness is Sabbath rest. The Creator rests to complete creation and calls all creaturely life to Sabbath. Davis reminds us that the most frequently cited commandment in the Bible is the command to Sabbath and that “like the temple, Sabbath is designed for one purpose only, to bring humans into intimate contact with God.”<sup>38</sup> The simple reason: relationship. Davis supports our guiding metaphor: “Like a parent who delights in a child, God chooses our company for no good reason at all.”<sup>39</sup>

Sabbath is the regular practice of remembering relationship with God. This remembering that we are sustained by our Creator God naturally and rightly leads human creatures to remember connection with other creatures. As Jesus would say, love of God and love of neighbor are tightly wound. There is a reason breaking of the Sabbath was punishable by death: abandoning Sabbath meant death and destruction for the cosmos, as we are reaping today. The rhythm of contemplation established by Creator God must include rest *for all Creation*. As Rohr says, “All contemplation reflects a seventh day choice and experience relying on grace instead of effort.”<sup>40</sup> The command of God for proper flourishing of creatures is the Sabbath, *and a proper*

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ : How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: New York : Convergent, [ 2021], 2021), 57-59. <https://find.library.duke.edu/>.

<sup>37</sup> Creation theologian Terence Fretheim frames the Exodus story as the Creator God responding to Egypt’s attempt to undo the Created Order. This will be the focus of Chapter 4. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Louisville, Kentucky : Westminster John Knox Press, [2010], 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Davis, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Rohr, *The Universal Christ : How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*, 57-59.

*ecology must include Sabbath rest.* (Sabbath introduces a particular kind of relationship that halts the restlessness that might otherwise rule)

This call on humanity to engage in active ecological engagement through practical steps will be further explored in our final chapter. There, we will dare to imagine specific ways of honoring this divine call to mastery, shepherding, and rest. God has blessed and called humanity to important work. But let us focus here on the primary foundational task:

*Our work in the divine image is habitual and intentional attention to God's presence in the Creation.* The means of doing this is the biblical command to Sabbath keeping. Such attention to Creation will lead us to praise of the Creator. There is no finer example of this than Saint Francis of Assisi. As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr clarifies about Francis, "He praises the creatures *because of* the Creator. He praises God *through* the world. It's easy to imagine him looking at the stars and wondering, 'If these are the creatures, what must their Creator be like?'"<sup>41</sup> Francis' contemplation of "All creatures of our God and King", from "brother sun, sister moon, flowers and fruits that in thee grow" led him (and us) to join creation in singing "O Praise ye, Alleluia!" Genesis reveals that to be made in the image of God is to be called to sing of the goodness of the creation "because of the Creator." It will be a consistent calling for humanity throughout the biblical witness.

## ***2.5 Remembering the Birth Story: Other Scriptural Witnesses***

*Praise God from who all blessings flow,  
Praise him all creatures here below.....*

—first lines of *Doxology*

**The Creation story** is not a one-time event, but a *creatio continua*. The Scriptures echo the priestly Creation account, revealing a God always bringing about something new and fresh while sustaining all He creates. But the Scriptures also point beyond themselves; they lead us to creation stories that are going on now. The book of Psalms, the prayer/song book of the Hebrew people, almost begs us, "Put me down and go outside! Pay attention and join in the song!"

This chapter seeks to highlight a refrain heard throughout Scripture: the goodness of God as seen in the beauty and orderliness of the created world. These are not isolated Scriptures; they echo and are meant to be read alongside our Creation stories in Genesis. They are also not isolated in their description of and connection with a lived creaturely experience. Though codified thousands of years ago, they witness to Scripture being "alive and active"; they incarnate what we mean when we confess that Scripture is "God-breathed." We too ponder the sun, moon and stars, consider the lilies of the field, and lift our eyes up to the mountains.

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<sup>41</sup> Adapted from Richard Rohr, "Christianity and the Creation: A Franciscan Speaks to Franciscans," in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, ed. Albert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 132–133, 134–135.



Creaturely life still looks beyond itself to be fed and teaches humanity that breath is a gift given, not earned.

Hearing these refrains throughout Scripture reveals a God who is creating still and calls us to join Creation's never-ending doxology.

### 2.5.1 The Psalms

The Psalms echo Genesis 1's call to see and declare God's goodness and presence in the Creation. The Psalmist summons us to a (contemplating) over Creation, giving our full attention to seeing and naming good as God does. The Psalms sing the goodness of Creation because of the Creator.

Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann holds that the closest parallel to Genesis One is the book of Psalms.<sup>42</sup> Here in the Psalms we see the giving and responding of relationship.<sup>43</sup> The Psalms account for creaturely responsiveness to the "speaking" of the Creator in creating. In other words, we hear the human side to the conversation God initiated in Genesis. Human creatures respond to our Creator through poetry, song, rejoicing and lament.

Psalm Eight is a beautiful echo of the first Creation account. Brueggemann categorizes Psalm Eight as a Psalm of Orientation that is a primary expression of creation faith.<sup>44</sup> Contemplating the orderliness and goodness of God's world reveals who God is. Brueggemann expresses the heart of the revelatory nature of creation found in Psalms of Orientation when he insists "Creation is an affirmation that God's faithfulness and goodness are experienced as generosity, continuity, and regularity."<sup>45</sup> Or, as the Church affirms in our great Creation hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, we know "thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not" because of "summer and winter, springtime and harvest, sun moon and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love."

Here at the beginning of Psalm 8, the majesty and sovereignty of God's name are made clear *in all the earth* [emphasis mine]:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

The Psalm begins and ends with the majesty of God that is revealed in the created order and the royal shepherding of humanity:

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<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 25-26.

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, 26.

- 1 *You have set your glory above the heavens.*
- 2 *Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

Such examination of creation leads to humility in human reflection:

- 3 *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;*
- 4 *what are humans that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

Is it any wonder that the word humility derives from the root humus, living closely to the soil?

Yet God has given humanity who are made from the dust of the earth important work. This work is royal, in the sense that it is done in representation of the Creator God:

- 5 *Yet you have made them a little lower than God  
and crowned them with glory and honor.*
- 6 *You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,*

The power and authority we have as shepherds are derived from the God in whose image we are made. In other words, we are to exercise power in the pattern of God, seen most fully and completely in the self-emptying of Jesus Christ. We'll talk more about Christ being the prototype of a proper creaturely life in Chapter 5.

Psalm Eight returns where we began, declaring the majesty of God's name in all the earth. Contemplating creation and doxology flow in an endless circle.

Let's consider a Psalm with a similar structure and theological focus as Psalm Eight. Here is the opening stanza of Psalm 95:

- 1 *O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*
- 2 *Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*
- 3 *For the Lord is a great God  
and a great King above all gods.*
- 4 *In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.*

5 *The sea is his, for he made it,  
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*  
6 *O come, let us worship and bow down;  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! (Pm 95:1-6)*

Like Psalm Eight, Psalm 95 begins and ends with praise. God is known as the “rock of salvation,” one who cannot be moved. The reason for this claim? Valleys and mountains, sea and dry land. Considering the One who holds the depths and heights of creation literally puts one on her knees.

Psalm 104 describes God’s intimate mastery over all creation. Brueggemann reveals a beautiful feature of this Psalm. He says it could almost read as a table prayer, yet it is not merely *how God feeds humans*. [emphasis mine]. Brueggemann bring to light the theological nature of eating when declaring that the Psalm shows us a world that is “daily dependent on God’s sustenance, God’s face, God’s presence, God’s breath.”<sup>46</sup> To say it a little differently, it is a much bigger table with more than human guests.

And all creations rely on God:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul.  
O Lord my God, you are very great.*

10 *You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,  
11 giving drink to every wild animal;*

13 *From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.*

14 *You cause the grass to grow for the cattle  
and plants for people to cultivate,  
to bring forth food from the earth*

15 *and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.*

16 *The trees of the field are watered abundantly,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

21 *The young lions roar for their prey,  
seeking their food from God.*

22 *These all look to you*

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<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, 32.

*to give them their food in due season;  
Bless the Lord, O my soul.  
Praise the Lord!* (Pm 104)

As we have repeatedly seen, the first and final movement of considering the creation is always praise of the Creator. This gives a cyclical, eternal sense of doxology.

As the Psalmist testifies, this praise does not come merely from humans, but all the cosmos.

Take Psalm 19:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth  
and their words to the end of the world.* (Pm. 19:1-4)

The voice of all the universe can also be heard in Psalm 96:

*O sing to the Lord a new song;  
sing to the Lord, all the earth.  
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar and all that fills it;  
12 let the field exult and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
13 before the Lord, for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.* (Pm 96:1,11-13)

This “new song” points toward “cosmic rejoicing” when God comes as Judge.<sup>47</sup> God’s return as judge is good news for a groaning creation, for God will make things right for that which He made.

Psalm 148 is also a Psalm of new orientation, a public hymn of praise, calling all creation to the praise of their Creator:

*Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!*

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<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann classifies Psalm 96 as a Psalm of new orientation brought about by the kingship of Yahweh. This royal rule will “bring about a reliable, equitable order to creation.” Brueggemann, 145.

2 Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his host!

3 Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!

4 Praise him, you highest heavens  
and you waters above the heavens!

7 Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,

8 fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!

10 Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds! (Pm 148)

And finally, in beautiful simplicity and summation, Psalm 150 expresses that universal doxology is the end and goal:

*“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”*

### 2.5.1.1 Seeing goodness when all is not right with the world.

But what about all that is chaotic and wrong in the world? Not all creatures can testify to a world of orientation based on lived experience.<sup>48</sup> In other words, we cannot say “it is good” to everything. We must have a way to speak of disorientation in creation. There is certainly a robust section of Psalms that testifies to disorientation, where we are taught how to lament in response to all that is chaotic and wrong. But disorientation does not negate praise of orientation. This is why, following Brueggemann, it is so important to emphasize the eschatological nature of our Psalms of Orientation. In other words, God is not finished yet. This is the wisdom pattern Rohr describes, the three stages of the cosmic narrative (life/death/resurrection, creation/fall/redemption, order/disorder/reorder). In the Psalms, Brueggemann speaks of this pattern as orientation/disorientation/reorientation. In this pattern, we see movement and possibility, *because of the character of God*. These Psalms are not merely singing a prayer of what already is, but declaring confident hope of what will one day be in the new orientation when God redeems the cosmos.

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<sup>48</sup> Brueggemann rightly warns us to read Psalms of orientation with “a suspicious possibility” knowing that those who have a sense of orderliness are probably “well-off, from the economically secure and the politically significant.” That does not mean that these Psalms cannot be called on by all (especially as Brueggemann notes, in a future redemptive sense). It does mean that we must as Brueggemann instructs, “always ask whose interest is reflected and served by such psalms and by their use.” Brueggemann, 26-28.

### 2.5.1.2 Providence: A God who will “see to it”

This future dimension of our faith leads us toward a needed exploration of the theological concept of provision. The word that is often translated as “provide” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *ra’ab*. Karl Barth translates this word “to see.” We see this word in Genesis 22 when Isaac inquires of Abraham where the lamb is for the sacrifice and Abraham responds, “The Lord will provide” (Gn 22:8). Brueggeman argues that Barth’s translation of this text is “the ground of (Barth’s) entire understanding of providence, the doctrine of God’s full provision of what is needed for his creatures.”<sup>49</sup> Another way of saying this is “The Lord will see to it.” God sees before humans can see. The Latin word for *ra’ab* is *pro-video*. This is the root of such words as provide, provision, providence. All points toward God “seeing to” something before humans can see it. Which is to say, we have faith in what we cannot see yet but trust that God already sees.

This brings us back to the concept of stewardship of pain, suffering, and the disoriented world. We can sing of a world of order and orientation, of all things being well because we trust that God *is seeing to that*. We trust the third stage which Brueggemann calls reorientation. God will make all things new. In the words of Frederick Buechner, Christian faith trusts that “the worst thing is not the last thing.”<sup>50</sup> We rejoice in the providence of God, literally how God will see things right in the end. God’s seeing is God’s committed action.

This future hope, and the peace and calm it produces in the human soul, are rooted in the character of God. Our seeing has a future dimension. It requires faith and imagination. And our images are guided by the revelation of the Resurrected Christ. We will discuss more about the Christian vision and new creation in light of the Resurrection in Chapter 4. But for now, we affirm that we are comforted by the provision of God, *trusting God is seeing to what we cannot yet see*.

### 2.5.2 Other Scriptural voices: A recurring call to see God’s providence in Creation.

Both the Old and New Testaments repeatedly call us to lift our eyes to Creation to remember this provision.

We hear this calling in Second Isaiah:

*Lift up your eyes on high and see:*

*Who created these?*

*He who brings out their host and numbers them,*

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<sup>49</sup> Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* III, as analyzed by Brueggemann, 191.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1965).

*calling them all by name;  
because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,  
not one is missing.* (Is 40:26)

Paul's letter to the Church in Rome reveals that contemplating creation makes knowledge of God's power and majesty obvious, so that we are without excuse withholding our praise:

*"Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..."* (Rom 1:20-21)

The ultimate image of the redeemed future cosmos in the book of Revelation concludes that God is worthy of glory, honor and power, *because God created all things* [emphasis mine]:

*"You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created."* (Rev 4:11)

This contemplation that leads to praise is not merely a formula to follow, but a natural doxology that springs up from paying attention to the daily wonder of life.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directs us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air to know the provision of the Creator. Jesus frequently draws human attention "down to earth" to miraculous things and processes like salt, seeds, yeast, and pearls.

Berry shares:

Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine—which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.<sup>51</sup>

Berry seems to be echoing the words of St. Gregory the Great from the Sixth century:

All wondered to see water once turned into wine. Every day the earth's moisture being drawn into the root of the vine, is turned by the grape into wine, and no one wonders.

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<sup>51</sup> Berry, 35.

Full of wonder then are all the things which we never think to wonder at, because they are by habit become dull to the consideration of them.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, the first act of contemplation might not require stepping outside but paying attention to the miracle on the dinner table.

Old Testament and Creation scholar Terence Fretheim masterfully says it: Just because something is ordinary does not mean it is not a miracle.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Scripture guides us that knowledge of the unknowable ways God works begins with contemplation at the table:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.  
10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
  
11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* —Isaiah 55:8-12

The question remains, will humanity be paying attention to join in the song of creation? The biblical witness indicates that Creation often schools humanity in how to praise, such as in the twelfth chapter of Job:

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
8 ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

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<sup>52</sup> Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* (540).

<sup>53</sup> Terrence Fretheim claims that the crisis of faith for the people of God in the Exodus wanderings was a crisis of food. Fretheim highlights that after the drama of the Red Sea deliverance, it was hard for the people of God to see the miracle of daily bread:

If the provision of God in the wilderness are all subsumed under the extraordinary or miraculous, then the people of God will tend to look for the provision of God only in that which falls outside the ordinary...The very presence and activity of God can be discerned in connection with daily provisions...Israel's situation is not unlike a community of faith whose understanding of 'an act of God' has been largely determined by their insurance policies. The connections of God with daily affairs has, for all practical purposes, disappeared." Fretheim, 182-83.



9 *Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?*  
10 *In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being.* (Job 12:7-10)

As we conclude this chapter of Scriptural refrains about the goodness of creation, how fitting to end with the final Glorified Vision in Revelation, seeing all creatures worshipping the one on the throne:

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them,  
singing,  
“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever!”* (Rv 5:13)

There is much that will and must be said about evil; it is a dangerous move to call anything and everything that happens in the natural world “sacred.” It would be the embrace of suffering, cruelty, evil, and death. I’ll say more about this in the next chapter. But our home base must be a world God creates and sees and calls good. This is the revealed biblical vision, which some of the best theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century echo.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who saw plenty of evil in his too-brief lifetime, still proclaimed:

God’s seeing protects the world from falling back into the void, protects it from total destruction. God sees the world as good, as created—even where it is the fallen world—and because of the way God sees his work and embraces it and does not forsake it, we live.<sup>54</sup>

Wright adds to this, “it is a remarkable feature of the earliest Christianity known to us that it refused to lapse at any point into a cosmological dualism in which the created world is regarded as less than good and God-given.”<sup>55</sup> Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Marilynne Robinson, who often tells stories of grace in ordinary life, charges us to “stop looking for ways to undervalue but instead consciously and intentionally evaluate what is good and remember is good by someone’s design. We have a habit of thinking only cynicism is honest, which is a terrible blindness.”<sup>56</sup> These wise voices from this century lead us rightly to the foundation of Christian faith.

The starting place for all creatures and places is that which *is seen by God* and pronounced as God’s good and beloved creation. The calling of all humanity in the image of God—our job

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<sup>54</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 25.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, 94.

<sup>56</sup> *Interview with Rowan Williams & Marilynne Robinson, 2018 Theology Conference* (Wheaton College: Wheaton College, 2018).

description—is to proclaim our Amen to this goodness and beauty. It is to see the created order and relationship between God, creatures, and humanity as we humbly submit ourselves to mastery among God’s beloved Creation.

### 3. CHAPTER THREE:

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#### *Seeing Creation undone.*

*“Because we have first seen the beauty of the world, we can now see the ugliness, realize what we have lost, understand how our whole life (and not just some ‘trespasses’) has become sin, and can repent of it.”*  
—Alexander Schmemmann

*“The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world.”* —Alexander Schmemmann

*“There are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places.”* —Wendell Berry

**Through the First Creation Story**, there is a rhythm of good creation springing forth by God’s design and will. God’s own speaking is generative, creating a dayspring of life and vitality from words. Over and again, God’s contemplative action is pronounced by God as “good.”

Original blessedness must be our starting point. Too often, Christian tradition begins the story with sin and evil in Genesis 3 and forgets the first two chapters. To speak of evil we must first know goodness. As Richard Rohr simply warns, “You cannot start with a problem; you start with a problem you will end with a problem.”<sup>1</sup> The Christian Narrative, and any decent theology, begin with original blessedness simply because God does.

But all cannot be called good. It is a dangerous and untruthful move to call anything and everything that happens in the world God’s doing. As the prophet Isaiah warns, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Is 5:20)! In other words, *the created world is not God*. This is a heresy known as pantheism, “God is all.” As Williams succinctly explains, “world ≠ God.”<sup>2</sup>

We need a way to name what is not God and not *of* God to tell the Christian story faithfully. We must have a way of speaking of pain, disorder, evil, and injustice. Faithful Christian witness acknowledges all that does not reflect the kingdom of God, and, as Jesus prayed and we echo in the Lord’s prayer, is not the will of God being done “on earth as it is in heaven.” The Gospel tells the truth of a beloved *and broken* world.

How has the Christian narrative done this?

With a concept—sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*.

<sup>2</sup> Williams treats this subject in a number of works. It is at its most accessible in his Introduction to Christian belief, *Tokens of Trust*. Williams, 38.

*“Did you know you are a drop of black paint?”*

I was trying to make it to my 1:00 Soil Science Class on West Campus from my college dorm room on the South Side. It was a typical hot muggy day in College Station, and I needed to hightail it to make it in time. I had my green JanSport backpack swung over one shoulder and my head tilted forward. I was in no mood to play. The quickest route to the Agronomy building took me right past the Student Center.

The Student Center could be a fun place to meet up for lunch or get involved in an organization. But enter at your own risk: There were those looking for the raw meat of the young and naive. And sometimes the hyenas come out of the den having spotted a vulnerable one. Walking across the Student Center was to submit to the risk that one might, rather accidentally, join the armed forces, apply for a credit card, or decide to be a member of an improv club.

There was one kind of loony to be avoided at all costs: the recent convert. I traveled through the heart of campus that day as feebly as Frodo through Mordor. I was good at spotting the signs...eyes gazing the horizon, a t-shirt with Scripture on it, anyone carrying a Bible to an afternoon accounting class.

*Don't make eye contact... just keep walking.*

But this one, she caught me.

*“Did you know you are a drop of black paint?”*

*“Uhhh.... hi,”* I awkwardly smiled.

*“And God, God is white paint.”*

I could see where this was going. The plan of salvation in Sherwin William's paint samples.

*“Abub”* ...I said noncommittally, keeping on walking but minding my manners.

*“You see, God is so pure, so holy. Sheer white. And even a drop of your sin is black paint that will corrupt the white. You know what will make your black paint white?”*

*Wha-aat?* I wondered, thinking back to early elementary.... *yellow and blue make green, red and blue...that's purple...but there's something special about black and white...what is it.... prime, primary...?*

*“The blood of Jesus,”* she blurted out. It was her line to hit hard, the answer to the equation, all that this world needed...*Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

My honest reaction was that in addition to bad theology, this girl had no basic understanding of the color wheel.

*“Just accept Jesus in your heart right now and your sins will be forgiven. Want to pray with me?”*

“*Uh, no....*” I muttered. “*I mean, I am a Christian but.... I just really need to get to class right now. Thanks.*”

“*Thanks,*” I said.

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Growing up in the Bible Belt, I hated the word sin. Even worse was when the word was applied to a person: *Sinner*. Sinners hung out in alleys. Sinners asked children to try drugs. Sinners did things in the backseats of cars good girls don’t do. To be a sinner was to be dirty. Perverted. *Black paint*. The only thing that could make me clean was to mix in Jesus’ blood.

I heard a lot of preaching about sin growing up, in and out of the pulpit. The best of it happened in coffee shops, hair salons, and on many road trips between Hereford and Amarillo to pass the time. To grow up in the Texas Panhandle is to need to drive 45 miles to make it to a big box store. Children were routinely stuffed into the backseats of blue Chrysler minivans and Buicks against their wills to “go to town.”

I remember sitting in the back seat of my best friend Clara’s white 1992 Ford Taurus as her mother Dixie drove us up the road to Westgate Mall in Amarillo. Dixie was a teacher to the severely and profoundly disabled. She smoked 2 packs of cigarettes a day and played computer games all night. After spending a day volunteering in her classroom, I decided to surrender all judgment on how Dixie coped.

Dixie was a preacher in her own right. She loved being a Lutheran, and she loved being right. She would often wax eloquently on a number of subjects as she smoked her Virginia Slims and drove us down long Panhandle roads.

After hearing her drone on about *Star Trek*, women knowing their place (I had heard her husband Carl say all of 6 words in his lifetime) and why her family had been Republican since the womb, the subject turned to the upcoming Prom which of course, led right into the fall of mankind at a woman’s hand. I made a bold statement that even surprised me:

“*Dixie, I don’t believe in original sin.*”

This stopped the Ford Taurus—and Dixie’s pontificating, dead in the road.

“*Well....*” she said, drawing the word out to three syllables as she took another drag. “*We believe in sin because we believe the Bible.*”

The ace-in-the-hole in every debate in the Panhandle of Texas: The Bible. It is upheld by every side to prove the point, and it usually can. I was now in a sunrise duel with the Bible on the other side, which meant the conversation—and my standing as a Christian—were over.

As a teenager, I never had the *chutzpah* to argue back with any of the (all male) preachers in my orbit, so Dixie had to do. Dixie and I drove up and down Highway 60 through my teenage years arguing about sin and the Bible. There's just not that much to do in the Panhandle.

I think often of those rides. What strikes me most as I reflect upon these conversations now is how small our musings on sin were; they were as compact and separate as the Ford Sedan which carried us through the big world and my 13-year-old reasoning. Not small because our talk was closed minded and judgmental (though it was both of those), but in our self-absorption. Perhaps the clearest sign that we were "sinful from our mother's womb" was our inability to see beyond ourselves and our time. Where was the engagement of our eyes and imaginations? Where was relationship?

What we needed was to look out the window.

### ***3.1 Seen and Unseen: Faithful Christian ecological seeing.***

*"We fix our eyes not on what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."* —1 Cor 4:18

*"Industrial humanity has brought about phase two of original sin."* —Wendell Berry

The Creation is often called "a window to God." A window allows you to see beyond a small perspective. It is opening the way to what we confess in our Nicene Creed, that God is "maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." This is getting at the idea of an icon. When I use the word icon, I fear losing us in the language. Perhaps we think of an archaic world inside the cathedral. It can seem abstract, strange, or something that only a very small number of super-religious people talks about. Isn't that a Russian thing, a little old picture on wood that old men with long white beards and pointy hats kneel before?

An icon is simply a window to God. It is a way of seeing *more* that is really going on. Rowan Williams helps us with this concept when he describes a world that "is not simply what we can manage and use for ourselves; there are unfathomable dimensions to it, hidden realities, hidden connections."<sup>3</sup>

When I think of iconic seeing, I remember an afternoon lying on our brown shag living room carpet when I was very young. As I daydreamed, a beam of light broke through the blinds on the sliding glass door. That sliver of light revealed thousands—millions—of particles floating in the air. *Were they always there? In every breath? Where else is there more going on that I can't usually see?*

Iconic seeing opens us to the awareness of these possibilities. We will never "see" it all, but we can confess all we don't know and see with a sense of wonder. It is seeking the sacred in the ordinary. Iconic vision is to see beauty and worth and goodness as God might see. It is to

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, 49.

blessedly lose yourself in the world without you at the center of it. This way of seeing is the delight of our souls.

An icon offers us a vision of God through creation. It is only a glimpse, for no sunrise or tree or spring (or work of art for that matter)—no matter how glorious—could contain all of God. No creature holds all of the Creator. Yet, the creation can be a *window* to the Creator, which is to say: there is more going on than what meets the eye. Our attentiveness can reveal what Jesus called “the kingdom of heaven among you.” This does not mean we leave the world to see God, any more than, to return to our car story, I would leave the car to gaze out the window at what lies beyond a little metal box. In fact, a window allows us to *see more deeply* into all the reality in which we “live and move and have our being.” By engaging in contemplation of the world, we enter more fully into this life and all its depths. We also move beyond the small (false) self. This kind of contemplation is how we speak of seeing and encountering God; it is also the right manner to approach our conversation of human sin.

To speak of sin is to be willing to see how humans have severed relationship between Creator and creatures and denied the sacredness of all Creation. When we confess “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” we are acknowledging that all humanity has failed to call and treat what God has made as sacred and denied our connectedness. To be lost in sin is to be isolated, to be trapped in “the world of me.” We can see this nature even in the preoccupation with assurance of personal salvation and anemic focus on faith as “Me and Jesus” and “my personal relationship with God” instead of the fullness of the people of God being chosen for the salvation of the world. It is striking how inherently selfish our conversations about conversion often are. What are we saved *for*? For heaven elsewhere? For wish fulfillment on a cloud somewhere *disconnected from all other life*? For something *after death*? Undergirding this is a belief that salvation means being saved *from* this world instead of saved *for* the sake of this world. We’ll talk more about the danger of “I’ll fly away” theology and the Church’s emphasis on heaven instead of the more biblical Resurrection in Chapter 6. For now, it is enough to affirm that our concept of sin and conversion must affirm the goodness of this Creation and creaturely life and bring about a deeper engagement with the world God so loved.

I have been attempting to make a connection between contemplation and sin, to persuade that we must first see goodness and sacredness to grieve what we have, in the words of Wendell Berry, desecrated. To return to Genesis One, it is only after we have responded “It is good” to God’s creativity, that we can see and grieve where we have undone creation.

What does this mean in a practical way? What does it look like in day-to-day life to see contemplatively, to be willing to more deeply encounter both goodness and sinfulness? This seeing isn’t magical or supernatural. It is not the work of “seers” in scarves and bangles, like Professor Trelawney in Harry Potter (who was not a true seer in that world either). Neither does it require special abilities, other than attentiveness (this is why children are often the best at contemplation).

I would like to return to the story of Dixie and I arguing in the car about sin to offer a way of seeing. It is an example of deeper engagement with not only a concept of sin, but with seeing our world “out the window” if you will, as we are “on the move.” It is an example not in that it is a perfect way of engaging contemplation or all-encompassing, but that it reveals a few deeper layers which our often-superficial eyes can miss. In this imaginative exercise, I strive to imagine a little more that is there beyond the surface and *enter more deeply* into that reality.

### **3.1.1 Cattle, feedyards and Walmart (and decimated bison, invisible people, depleted water, and sick soil).**

Had I looked out the window of the Ford Taurus going down Highway 60 across the Texas Panhandle as I thought about sin, here is what I would have seen:

Immediately and obviously, there are cattle. Some 2.1 million head of them live in feedyards in the Texas Panhandle lining Highway 60. At sunset, dust clouds permeate the evening air—“*shust*” as the locals say. Often when approaching my hometown of Hereford at night from Amarillo on this main road, it would look like we were driving into a thriving metropolis. “*That’s what happens when every cow has a night light,*” my mother would remark. The very definition of a feedlot is a high number of animals concentrated in a very small area. Cattle are trucked to Hereford and surrounding communities to be “finished”; plumped up before slaughter. The conditions for this final fattening can’t be comfortable; cattle are packed in pens to stand in their own feces and urine around the clock.

Most commercial agriculture in the Panhandle finishes cattle on a high protein mixture of grains, mainly corn. The grains that are used to supplement the cattle diet are not native to the Plains and designed for fast weight accumulation. According to Robert Martin, Director of the Food System Policy Program at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 70% of the 14.2 billion bushels of corn the US produces annually feed livestock. It takes 600 **trillion** gallons of water for corn in annual feedlot use.<sup>4</sup> Corn is the most water intensive crop in an area where water is sourced from the precious and rapidly diminishing Ogallala Aquifer which pools, unseen, underground.

And all that feed has to go somewhere besides “on” the animal. According to the USDA, “For every 10 pounds of nutrients consumed by the animal, 8-9 pounds are excreted in feces and urine.”<sup>5</sup> As my 7-year-old son will gleefully tell you, they “poop and pee”—a lot. On the dry flat and treeless windy plains of Texas, that manure and urine—or more accurately ammonia gas—is constantly in the air. “*The smell of money*” I heard ad nauseum growing up. The Texas Agricultural Extension Service is conducting research on the actual runoff levels of ammonia—and nitrogen—from feedlots and how widespread the damage to ecosystems from

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Gill, "Is Feedlot Beef Bad for the Environment?," Wall Street Journal, 2015, accessed January 19, 2024, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-feedlot-beef-bad-for-the-environment-1436757037#comments\\_sector](https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-feedlot-beef-bad-for-the-environment-1436757037#comments_sector).

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, "An Environmental Look at American Feedlots," *Agricultural Research*, July 2003, 2003, 10-11.



both dust in the air and runoff into water sources might be.<sup>6</sup> Ruminants (cattle, sheep) are responsible for half of agricultural greenhouse gas emissions according to the World Resources Institute.

But we don't *see* gases and runoff. It takes a different *more intentional* way of viewing these things. It takes the kind of examination that wonders, "What is in our lungs, our ears, eyes and mouths from this?" It takes a willingness to ask, "What and who is intentionally being kept behind curtains, *and why?*"

This leads to the human component behind industrial meat: the labor force that makes this kind of model possible. Working cattle, particularly processing beef in slaughterhouses, is labor that is physically difficult, notoriously dangerous, and driven by profits. It is largely undocumented workers desperate for work who provide labor in meatpacking plants on graveyard shifts. These communities often must choose between health and livelihood.<sup>7</sup> The conditions for these human creatures are difficult: during the COVID pandemic, Coronavirus was spreading in slaughterhouses at alarming rates due to tight conditions and the philosophy "the chain does not stop."<sup>8</sup> It is no accident that precise numbers of meat industry employees who became ill or died of COVID are difficult to find.<sup>9</sup>

This is nothing new. As documented by the Harvard Center for History and Economics, the meat production model of the last 150 years relies on cheap human labor like no other industry. Meat was not considered "essential" as a dietary staple in America until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when it became a marker of "making it" in America. Before this, meat was for high religious days. A world that does not feast also does not fast. Because of the new demand of

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<sup>6</sup> Agriculture.

<sup>7</sup> Hear a refugee's heartbreaking testimony about being pregnant with her child and watching her mother go through the agonizing choice to stay safe or go to work at a slaughterhouse during COVID. San Twin, Opinion, "Covid-19 Ravaged Meat Plants: My Refugee Mother's Life Is Worth More Than the Bottom Line," *USA Today* (McLean, VA), Opinion, October 1, 2020, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2020/10/01/meat-packing-plants-coronavirus-covid-19-death-column/3586030001/>.

<sup>8</sup> In his freelance journalism in his home state of Kansas, Michael Holz worked 10-hour night shifts for six months at Cargill's largest slaughterhouse in Dodge City, Kansas. During this time, he made friends with Mexican, Haitian, African, and Karen coworkers who at first thought he was an undercover boss because they had never seen a "white guy" on the line. Holz details the grueling physical toll of working the line on his body and the relationships he formed. Union reps and supervisors repeatedly asked workers, "Why are we here? To make money!" When being taught how to cut meat, the teaching was "more meat means more money." Michael Holz, "Six Months inside One of America's Most Dangerous Industries: What I Learned on the Line at a Dodge City Slaughterhouse.," *The Atlantic*, 2021. See also Eric Schlosser, "The Essentials: How We're Killing the People Who Feed Us," *The Atlantic* (2020).

<sup>9</sup> In 2021, the USDA published a study analyzing data obtained from the Occupational Information Network concerning the spread of COVID in the meatpacking industry. It states, "In mid-April 2020, COVID-19 cases in meatpacking-dependent rural counties rose to nearly 10 times the number in comparison to rural counties dependent on other single manufacturing industries." These numbers decreased drastically in July, and the study infers this is because the industry then implemented safety precautions. I wonder, would this have happened without public outcry and the threat to "the chain stopping?" United States Department of Agriculture, *Covid-19 Working Paper: Meatpacking Working Conditions and the Spread of Covid-19*, by Jr. and Corey Goodrich Thomas P. Krumeel (Washington DC: Economic Research Service, #AP-092 2021).

having meat as a status marker, it needed to be cheaply available to all through mass production. Small ranchers and highly skilled butchers were replaced by cheap labor who were asked by the industry to be “pacesetters.” Speed in butchering means money. The work is physically grueling because the butchering of a large animal cannot be automated by machine. Then and now, meat industry work often results in death, dismemberment, and chronic illness for a workforce pushed to work faster and faster for profits.<sup>10</sup> Those who were and are willing to pay the price of their health and lives are vulnerable populations of immigrants who have little organizational, political, or economic power. They often work in the dark of night in windowless buildings on the outskirts of rural areas. *Such as Hereford Texas.*

As a fifth generation Panhandle resident who lived in Hereford for 18 years, I could not tell you where the slaughterhouses were located much less imagine what happened inside. By design we don’t see this part because we *don’t want to see it*. As a cliché phrase goes—we don’t want to see “how the sausage gets made,” much less those who do the slaughtering and processing. This is but some of the unseen present reality, hidden in plain sight.

We begin with the present, but is the present all we are called to see? Surely, reality is more than “our lifetime.” Indeed, much of the ecological crisis we find ourselves in is due to our incapability to imagine life beyond our lifespan. This short-sightedness eliminates both past and future generations.

Contemplative seeing requires us to see beyond the present moment. It takes an engagement with the past that asks, “What came before us?” and imagination that dreams “What will this look like for the future?” To say it differently, past and future both matter, and failing to acknowledge either is not only limited but inherently selfish. To be willing to “see” beyond our own brief lifespans requires both the engagement of deep memory as well as prophetic imagination. Let’s continue our imaginative project by engaging memory in our seeing:

### **3.1.1.2 Faithful seeing: Engagement with deep memory.**

*“Mitakuye Oyasin”* (“All are Related”) —Lakota Prayer

*“These men have done more in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last forty years. They are destroying the Indians’ commissary. And it is a well-known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; but for a lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle.”*

—U.S. Gen. Philip Henry Sheridan

Cattle are easy to see on the Texas Panhandle, standing on mounds of manure in feedyards, stuffed into 18 wheelers, lined up at feeding troughs. But what is harder to see, in every sense,

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<sup>10</sup> Joshua Specht, *Coronavirus in the Slaughterhouse* (Harvard University, 2023), <https://histecon.fas.harvard.edu/climate-loss/slaughterhouse/index.html>.

is the bison, better known as the American buffalo. To see the bison is not only to access deep memory, but to see the complexity of human creatures and our sinful nature.

The bison were the native animal of the Plains, well adapted to graze on grassland. For 600 generations, Native Peoples lived on the Plains in an intimate relationship of dependency on the bison. According to the National Parks Service, Native peoples had over 150 uses for the bison and used all parts of the animal as Ken Burns reflects, “from snout to tail.”<sup>11</sup> The sacrifice of one bison provided about 400 pounds of meat, enough to feed one person for 200 days or a whole tribe for days. The Lakota tribes would end their prayers and rituals over bison with the phrase *Mitakuye Oyasin*, “all are related.” It was a beautiful symbiotic relationship, an example of ethical meat eating, and the very definition of “mastery among.”

Westward Expansion in the name of Manifest Destiny by “the white man” changed this (another violent misapplication of Christian Scripture).

In his heartbreaking yet hopeful documentary, *The American Buffalo*, Burns highlights the mere four of five generations of experience European settlers had with the land compared to the 600 generations of native peoples. A new concept of *my: my land, my animals, my rights*—emerged with the white man. The years 1820-1880 are known as the time of “The Great Slaughter.” The American buffalo population went from an estimated 30-60 million to fewer than 300 in the 1890s. As Burns points out, even those who took steps towards the conservation of the bison, such as Teddy Roosevelt and Temple Hornaday, were also contributors to near extinction. The human condition is complex. As pointed out by Burns, in these stories we see both the darkness of humanity as well as our possibility for transformation.

To take this a haunting, but connected step further, we no longer see the Comanche, Kiowa and Cheyenne peoples on the Plains either. The near extinction of the American buffalo was directly and intentionally connected to the near extinction of Native peoples. They were relocated and nearly exterminated, as ruthlessly as anything that happened in 1940s Germany. This was attempted annihilation of an entire people group—and their culture, in the name of the superiority of another life and culture. This is the very definition of instrumental seeing of human creatures, also called dehumanization. It is not a far jump from refusing to see a part of creation as sacred to taking human life. And it is not a jump from the extermination of wildlife to human creatures.

*It is a complex and connected Creation.*

There is another vital connection to see—that of land and water. When we look out the window on the Plains in the present, we see the plowing of the grassland. Native Americans puzzlingly referred to this as “turning the sod wrong side up.” This often happens with a lot

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Burns heartbreakingly captures the near extinction of the American buffalo as well as signs of hope, in his documentary of the same name. Most fascinatingly, he offers a vision of history from the lens of an animal. *The American Buffalo*, (PBS, 2023).

of sexy and expensive farm equipment. My father, who grew up farming the land and works as an agriculture and conservation journalist, has devoted his life to the contemplation of soil and water.<sup>12</sup> He calls this method of farming “an ecological folly and irony.” One day on the telephone with my dad, the conversation suddenly turns to the building of a new Wal-Mart on a known flood plain and natural spring. It might seem a leap to go from talking about plowing of grassland to big box stores, but indeed “all are related.”

When dad drives past the Wal-Mart now, he both remembers and imagines native life. He tells me:

Both grass and functioning playas (lakes that form from rainfall) are vital to recharge the aquifer. Yet, in our region, playas came to be regarded as “waste acres” because they were not productive of what was considered valuable crops. Playas and grasslands feed the aquifer, which when abundant, feeds the springs—it goes in a circle. Building Wal-Marts and housing developments and shopping malls in playa drainages and wetlands kills playas and promotes flooding. One of the quickest ways to start on the road to playa recovery is to protect the upland zones around them with grassland buffers.

Through both his study of history and his careful attention to the soil he farmed and that his parents and grandparents are buried in, he makes the following observations:

The perfect ecological system of native grassland and high intensity, short duration grazing by bison helped the water and soil cycle, recharged the aquifer, enhanced spring flow, and harvested sunlight in a well-balanced manner. Yet, newcomers to the land with their idea of “productivity” killed off the great grazers and replaced native grasses with a ridiculous imitator in the form of wheat and other grains not nearly so suited to the Plains or as productive in the arid environment here.

Now, feedlots are full of cattle that graze wheat instead of native grass and are finished on grain in a highly water intensive system. And that system of intensive farming and destroying the native rangeland also killed the native springs and has steadily over pumped the Ogallala aquifer. Aquifers nationwide are being depleted at an alarming rate. On the Great Plains, the soil nurtured the grasses that nurtured great herds of ungulates, that stirred the soil with hoof action so that the soil and the turf could catch and hold rainwater and return it to the water cycle. Soil functions best when it has live roots working in it and cover growing on it. The notion of “clean farming” has worked against that, and as some respected soil experts will say, we now have soil that is starving to death and running a temperature.

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<sup>12</sup> See his book, Jim Steiert, *Playas: Jewels of the Plains* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1994).

“In the face of the glory of creation there must be a tremendous sadness” says Schmemmann.<sup>13</sup> My dad has never heard of Alexander Schmemmann and fell asleep in the only seminary class he attended with me, but Dad is a friend of God who has been given eyes to see and tears to weep.

Dad is a “master among” creatures; engaged in a life of active management. He speaks for what others cannot or refuse to see. He is a student of history. He imagines what the future will look like if we do not change course. He sees possibility for recovery and renewal. He is an example of what we will explore soon, a prophet.

Some can see the beauty—and the loss and pain—of our ecological fall and some cannot. Some have deep memory or are willing to hear from those with deep memory, and some will not. Some engage in imagination that both haunts and hopes as much as Ebenezer Scrooge’s ghost of Christmas yet to come, and some cannot picture a future beyond their lifespan. “In the effort to tell a whole story, to see it whole and clear, I have had to imagine more than I have known,” recalls Berry.<sup>14</sup>

Many are just like me...going down the road of life in our air-conditioned cars debating notions of personal morality without ever looking out the window for any kind of bigger picture. “All things are related” the Native Peoples prayed. But we cannot see this if we refuse to look further than our own faces or engage any contemplation or imagination about other creaturely life beyond own small living. This is sin and folly.

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*The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* —Gn 3:2-5

### ***3.2 Fall from connection: Genesis 3***

**Relationship is the heart** of the Genesis story. Ecology is theology because God the Trinity *is* relationship. The Fall is a story of loss of relationship and connection. We fall from seeing our relationship with the rest of Creation and the Creator. Our fallen nature is often referred to biblically as blindness or hard-heartedness. It is a blindness to ecology. Or to say it differently, our sin is a failure to see how things are related and improperly related. Berry beautifully describes the ecological damage done by such violence: “Though it looks, it no longer sees truly since it has lost *the imagination* [emphasis mine] to see the sanctity of created

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<sup>13</sup> Schmemmann, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Berry, 465.

things or the vast and indescribably complex memberships of which they and we are but one part.”<sup>15</sup>

Berry affirms what this thesis seeks to argue, that at its core, the ecological crisis is a crisis of theological imagination.

In offering his definition of imagination in his essay *It All Turns on Affection*, Berry describes it this way:

The sense of the verb “to imagine” contains the full richness of the verb “to see.” Imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection...by imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and our love for it...by imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place. As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection...and it all turns on affection.<sup>16</sup>

Wendell Berry is getting at what Julian of Norwich concluded when asked about God’s purposes: “Love... love was his meaning.” To imagine—to see “with the mind’s eye” as Berry says, is to engage the heart. The converse of this—refusing contact, connection, with fellow members, leads to disinterest, isolation, and destruction. When we choose to stop seeing relationship and connection—when we are blind to the sacred in ourselves, our neighbor, and the world and non-human creatures God created—desecration follows.

### **3.2.1 That Pesky free will**

The First Creation account closes with God calling human creatures to fruitfulness alongside creation and the shepherding of all creation. The refrain after this command to fruitfulness has been “And then it was so.” In the biblical account, to speak is to be. Until we come to humanity, that is.

Davis notes, when it comes to this charge to human creatures, the Creation poem does not continue the rhythmic pattern of “And it was so.”<sup>17</sup> It will be open-ended how—and if—human creatures will reflect God’s image and honor our original vocation. Davis rightly calls the biblical God “a risk-taker, and the first and biggest risk is creation of this dangerously powerful creature, the human creature”<sup>18</sup>

*“I have a bone to pick with God,”* Tonya Kleuskens tells my mom over a cup of Constant Comment in our yellow kitchen. I’m 9-years-old and eavesdropping. Tonya, along with her husband Dale, farm the land off of Highway 60 we have been contemplating. I’ve listened to

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<sup>15</sup> Berry as quoted in Norman Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Berry, 548-49, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, 10.

Tonya and my mom seamlessly move from talking the storage of radioactive plutonium in the Great Plains, to beekeeping to raising teenage girls to God for years.

*“It’s this free will thing. I don’t get it. What was God thinking???”*

Tonya is one of my favorite theologians.

Free will can be defined as the freedom to see differently than God sees. Or to say it differently, to refuse to see “beyond the nose on our own face.” We can choose a different vision than God’s revelation. The Fall as Davis so rightly says, is “a story of humanity’s failure to claim its proper role in the created order.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, we see ourselves as *God* in the story. We come to believe we have the knowledge of God, that we can rightfully judge, and that we are immortal. God, in God’s own image, created humanity to be generative, but that does *not* include creating our own narrative where we are God and the creation is ours. As Berry tells us:

Humans do not own the world or any part of it: “The earth is *the Lord’s* [emphasis mine], and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein... It is this world that God loves, and love of the whole creation which is the impetus for the sending of Christ into it.”<sup>20</sup>

To summarize: this is God’s world, and God loves it enough to send the Son.

Presbyterian minister Maltbie D. Babcock’s 1912 hymn “This is My Father’s World” professes:

*This is my Father’s world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
the music of the spheres.*

*This is my Father’s world:  
I rest me in the thought  
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas  
His hand the wonders wrought.*

Yet, the actions (and lack of actions) of professing Christians suggest otherwise. Our lack of concern for care of the soil, water conservation, plastics in the ocean, extinction of species, suggests a view of the creation belonging to us to be used for human consumption instead of the vision of belonging to God. As Berry concludes, that makes the destruction of nature:

not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility but blasphemy. We have no entitlement from the Bible to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the

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<sup>19</sup> Davis, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Berry, 30-31.

waters beneath it. We have the right to use what we need but no more, which is why the Bible forbids usury and great accumulations of property.<sup>21</sup>

We are fallen not from godliness, but from honoring our own—and shared—creatureliness.

We are failing at being creatures. Even for those who claim no theological belief, the understanding of earth as belonging to humanity is insipid. Wirzba, summarizing Berry, shares that “to know that we are not the owners or possessors of the world amounts to a ‘startling reversal of our ordinary sense of things.’”<sup>22</sup>

This is simply a question of ownership—who does the world belong to? Clarity about ownership and consent of all created things is what keeps us from acts of violence. Whether we are denying the sacredness of another human body through sexual violence or a watershed, we are viewing that which belongs to God as belonging to us. The result of this violation is a profound sense of *disorder between God and human creatures, human creatures to other creatures, and human creatures to the rest of creation*. Just like Adam and Eve sewing together their fig leaves in shame, we deny connection and limits that would promote the flourishing of all. It will not be long after moments of falsely seeing ourselves as gods entitled to own “the other” before blood is spilled on the ground.

### 3.2.2 Choosing a different vision than limits

In the story of the Fall, we hear all our stories when we choose a different vision than God’s. The Fall is but one of many moments that we, as Davis says, “are invited to see how a moment of perception, human or divine, has lasting consequences for the characters in the narrative, and also for us who share their story.”<sup>23</sup> The way we see has drastic consequences.

God makes human creatures in the divine image and gives them tremendous power. No creature is bestowed with power, responsibility and freedom like the human creature. Yet we are still *creatures*. We are transient, not because of the Fall, but God’s design.<sup>24</sup> Dust animated by the breath of God, but still dust.<sup>25</sup> We are called to see as God sees but *to never assume we can or should have the whole vision*, to “see as God sees”, as the biblical text says. This is a violation of

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<sup>21</sup> Berry, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Wirzba, "The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life," 253.

<sup>23</sup> Davis, 46.

<sup>24</sup> This is a key part in the understanding of Wright, death was always a part of the transient creation as opposed to ‘spiritual death’ which is another dimension of death. “Transience acts as a God-given signpost pointing not from the material world to the non-material world but from the world *as it is* to the world *as it is meant one day to be*.” Wright, 94-95.

<sup>25</sup> Wirzba, following Berry, makes the critical distinction that a human is not a body in which God has placed a soul, but a soul is dust +the breath of God. “We are dust and we are God-breathed.” Norman Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, IN : University of Notre Dame Press, 2022., 2022), 52-53.



the created order of Creator and Created. As Wirzba simply and elegantly says, “We are impatient and unskilled at being creatures.”<sup>26</sup>

At the very heart of all of this is an utterly divine concept: *limits*. God has created and so ordered a creation with limits. Limits, such as margins between water and dry land, daytime and evening, earth and sky, work time and rest time, fallow and farmed land, are at the heart of the good creation. God’s limits pronounce that human creatures cannot take and eat everything; they cannot have everything for their consumption. We strive for a way of seeing that desecrates (literally de-sacreds) the given value of humanity and other creatures by denying limits.

There is another word for wanting to live without limits and thus play God: Idolatry.

### ***3.3 False seeing: The Great Temptation of idolatry***

In his Second Treatise, early Church father John of Damascus says the serpent “inspired with the hope and desire of becoming a god.” Instead of the pleasure and delight of being creatures, we want to be the Creator. Idolatry is wanting to see as only God can see.<sup>27</sup> This might seem confusing in a work that calls for a theological way of seeing. But God’s vision found in Scripture reveals humans to have limits; we are not those who can see the difference between good or evil, we are not those who are able to completely see as God sees. In other words, we are not those who may delineate belonging.

Brian McLaren, building on the work of James Alison’s reading of René Girard, says,

If the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ means ‘presuming to know who is good and evil’ so we can kill or expel those we deem evil and preserve those we deem good...then it is no accident that Adam and Eve’s eating leads to their son Cain’s fratricide.<sup>28</sup>

Desecration leads to violence.

An idol has aptly been called a mirror that points us back to ourselves instead of a window to the image of God.<sup>29</sup> It is the opposite of the contemplative mind. We become lost in our self-absorption, often manifested in anxiety, fear, overconsumption, and greed, where the cosmos

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<sup>26</sup> Wirzba, "The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life," 258.

<sup>27</sup> “Insofar as we claim to have grasped God using the various categories of the understanding, we can be sure that we have laid hold of an idol rather than God. God forever eludes all reasoning, knowing, and naming,” Wirzba, "The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life," 261.

<sup>28</sup> Brian McLaren, "Original Sin Q and A," 2012, [brianmclaren.net/q-r-original-sin](http://brianmclaren.net/q-r-original-sin).

<sup>29</sup> Wirzba guides us to the metaphor of mirror in defining an idol and suggests the work of Jean-Luc Marion *God Without Being* (Chapters 1 and 2) in expanding on idols and icons. Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation (the Church and Postmodern Culture) : A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World, The Church and Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015).

is the world of “I” and we are but masters of the universe.<sup>30</sup> This is not the mastery of submission on behalf of the flourishing of another we explored in Chapter 1 but using of the other instrumentally for “me and my rights.” Idolatry is fundamentally lonely. The first time God breaks the rhythm of calling creation good with “it is *not* good” is seeing a human alone without community (Gen 2:18).

It follows that a time of heightened individualism, where individual rights are held sacred above all, would also be marked as a time of profound loneliness. Vivek Murthy, the US Surgeon General, has shined a spotlight on what he calls “an epidemic of loneliness.”<sup>31</sup> Loneliness is not the same as solitude, and neither are its effects as mild as sadness or feeling a little down. Loneliness is a state of isolation from others and disconnection from relationship that leads to premature death comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes every day.<sup>32</sup> Loneliness has devastating consequences on public health such as heart disease, depression, stroke, dementia, and premature death. The US Department of Health and Human Services has identified technology, digital environments, infrastructures that do not promote communal interaction, and changing kinship structures as some contributing factors. The USDHHS urges “change is needed across the full scope of the social-ecological model.”<sup>33</sup> The panacea: Connection.

The foundational cause of this epidemic is the enshrinement of cultural values of individual rights and autonomy. In short, connection and relationship are not high on the value list for a country whose main identifying marker is a desire for independence. In his work describing Christianity as “the story of everything and everyone,” Rowe speaks of other narratives that threaten the Christian story, and foremost among them is the story of the autonomous individual. This uniquely American story of “the rugged individual” has been fused with (if not replaced) the Christian Gospel to the degree that one story is often called the other. Make no mistake about it, however, holding individual rights sacred above all is idolatry and blasphemy of the one who laid down all rights for the sake of another (Ph 2).

The idol of individualism is the opposite of “everything is related” and leaves us unable to see the wages of sin beyond a personal salvation.

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<sup>30</sup> The philosopher Iris Murdoch, following Simone Weil, notes the necessary shedding of ego and the main reference point of “I” to truly see. In Christian language, we call this the necessary “dying to self” so that Christ can live through us. See Matthew T. Eggemeier, “Ecology and Vision: Contemplation as Environmental Practice,” *Worldviews* 18, no. 1 (2014): 57-58, accessed 2023/02/09/.

<sup>31</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, *New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm About the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States* (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, by US Office of the Surgeon General (Washington, DC, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> , 18..

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the Orthodox Church, speaks to this when he observes:

We have tended to restrict the notion of sin to the individual sense of guilt or the social sense of wrongdoing. Yet sin also contains a cosmic dimension, and repentance from environmental sin demands a radical transformation of the way we perceive the natural world and a tangible change in the way we choose to live.<sup>34</sup>

Bartholomew is echoing the concerns of his forebearer, Schmemmann who lamented “the extremely narrow and individual meaning” of original sin while ignoring its cosmic dimensions.<sup>35</sup> We often frame sin as an individual list of moral failures instead of the forces, the principalities and powers of which Paul speaks, that infect every level of institution and culture. “*The wages of sin is death*” is viewed through an individualistic lens as “*I will die and go to hell if I don’t receive Jesus.*” Turns out that sin is not a bathtub, it is a sea.<sup>36</sup> Neither is sin a theoretical tally God is keeping for a future day. Wirzba anchors us in the wages of sin in our lived experience when he warns us:

Human sinfulness is not an abstraction. It is made manifest in soil washed into the sea, in watersheds poisoned by synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, in mountain tops blown up and then removed for their coal, and in rural communities destroyed and emptied out by what Berry has called the career of money.<sup>37</sup>

The wages of sin—literally death—are being experienced in the now because of idolatry.<sup>38</sup>

The Apostle Paul speaks of all creation being in the throes of labor and “groaning for redemption” (Rm 8:22). We don’t have to imagine this metaphor with the reality of extinction of species, flooding, harsher winters, and unbearably hot summers. There is a need for salvation and redemption for the literal survival of species today. Wirzba continues: “It is when we make ourselves the goal of the world, as when we manipulate or redesign the earth and its creatures to satisfy self-chosen and self-enhancing aims, that the memberships of creation begin to unravel.”<sup>39</sup> We are experiencing that unraveling.

This is where, understandably, we can become lost in despair that leads us to apathy. As Paul laments in Romans, “Who will rescue us from life dominated by sin and death” (Rm 7:24,

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<sup>34</sup> Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Everything that Breathes Praises God,” *Reflections: God’s Green Earth* (Spring 2007): [https:// reflections.yale.edu/article/gods-green-earth/everything-breathespraises-god](https://reflections.yale.edu/article/gods-green-earth/everything-breathespraises-god).

<sup>35</sup> Schmemmann, 81.

<sup>36</sup> William H Lamar IV, Pastor of Metropolitan AME in Washington DC, spoke in a class. I asked him to describe how our concept of sin as solely an individual matter keeps us from addressing structural and systemic change. His response: “We are drowning in the bathtub of personal morality when there is an ocean of sin.”

<sup>37</sup> Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” 263.

<sup>38</sup> We lament to see this nowhere as clearly as the lives of children sacrificed to the American idol of gun ownership.

<sup>39</sup> Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” 258.

New Living Translation)? How do we get out of this? What is our future story? Who will save us? How will something new be born?

## 4. CHAPTER FOUR:

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### *The Exodus Story: The Creator delivers.*

*“Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?’”*

—Num 11:12

*“I have come down to deliver them”* —Ex 3:8

*“You must be born again.”* —Jn 3:7

As we established in Chapter One, key in our ecological understanding is that creation is not a one-time event in the past but ongoing sustaining relationship with God. Christian Scripture and tradition have used creation language such as “new birth” “new creation” and “being born again” to express this *creatio continua*. To speak of God as the Creator means constant creating—of being *delivered* from one state to another.

This rightfully returns us to what I have argued is the dominant image of Genesis 1, that of childbirth. But this is not an image found “in the beginning” of Holy Scripture alone, but one that the biblical writers will return to again and again. The reason? Because the Creator God keeps giving birth, keeps delivering the Creation, keeps doing a new thing

We proclaim this central metaphor and truth in the gathering for Holy Communion. The United Methodist book of worship, in closeness to much Christian Table liturgy, proclaims:

It is right, and a good and joyful thing,  
always and everywhere to give thanks to you,  
Father Almighty, *creator* of heaven and earth.  
You *formed us* in your image  
and *breathed into us* the breath of life.  
When we turned away, and our love failed,  
your love remained steadfast.  
You *delivered us* from captivity....  
Holy are you, and blessing is your Son Jesus Christ.  
By the baptism of his suffering death, and resurrection  
You *gave birth* to your church,  
*delivered us* from slavery to sin and death  
and *made with us* a new covenant  
*by water and the Spirit.*

This is the pattern our Holy Scriptures echo again and again: the birth of new life which redeems and sustains.

What does this emphasis on God's role as Creator have to do with the redemption of an unraveling world? Turns out, everything. Speaking of God as Trinity is always and rightfully a challenge and mystery. At its core, it reveals the relational nature of God. Our Creator is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ. But what if we ponder the concept of Trinity as descriptive of *the actions* of God? In other words, Father, Son and Holy Spirit describes how God creates, redeems and sustains the world. But those actions, though distinct, are never separate. Which is to say, we can't talk about redemption without the possibility of something new and fresh happening, and we can't talk about an undoing and evil we need rescued from without talking about an original goodness and blessing. Which brings us back to our needing to talk about God being the Creator to speak of redemption. Because Creation is not only a past event or "how everything started" but the ongoing, sustaining work of God, It means we are not trapped, and that suffering—though real—is not the final word.

The hymn *Restless Weaver* describes God's never-ending creating which redeems and sustains all life as it makes something new:

*Restless Weaver, ever spinning threads of justice and shalom;  
Dreaming patterns of creation where all creatures find a home;  
Gathering up life's varied fibers – every texture, every hue:  
Grant us your creative vision, with us weave your world anew.*

*Restless Weaver, still conceiving new life – now and yet to be –  
Binding all your vast creation in one living tapestry:*

In the image of a weaver, we see a God who can take the pieces and graft something beautiful. We have a God who gathers the disconnected and isolated and weaves it back into a communal tapestry of creation. The work of redemption, as Terence Fretheim says, "always serves God's goals in and for the creation."<sup>1</sup>

Time and again in Holy Scripture, the seeing of suffering and pain results in a God who "comes down" to deliver. God's seeing means the Creator's active engagement. We see this in the Garden, when God searches for Adam and Eve lost in their idolatry, even as they hide from God. The Creator seeks them in order to make a new way forward for them. It is not an end, but really the beginning of the story. In the story of the Flood, God sees destruction and violence and repents of creating in the first place. And yet, God creates a safe space to harbor creatures and humanity from the full destruction and establishes a new covenant in the sign of the rainbow. It is God who intervenes after seeing Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, seeing to a future for the family of Abraham and the people Israel. Each of these mentioned narratives, though far from exhaustive, is a story of the Creator continuing to bring forth new

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<sup>1</sup> Fretheim, 40.

possibility, and in so doing, redeeming and sustaining the people of God. God is always generative. And that ability to always create means redemption. Rowan Williams says it like this, “God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different to bring something new out a situation.”<sup>2</sup>

Most notably in the Old Testament, we see this act of generative deliverance in the Exodus story.

#### ***4.1 The Exodus Delivery***

*“And it happened when a long time had passed that the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and their plea from the bondage went up to God. And God heard their moaning and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites and God knew.”* —Ex 2:23-25, translation Robert Alter<sup>3</sup>

The Exodus story is the birth story of the people of God. It is the baby book the people of God return to again and again to know who they are. In the story, the people are delivered “brought out” from a dark and confining state of Egypt through the birthing waters of the Red Sea, infancy in the wilderness with the starter food of manna, towards the land of milk and honey.

In her work, *The Biography of Ancient Israel, National Narratives in the Bible*, Hebrew and feminist scholar Ilana Pardes beautifully describes all of the Exodus event as a birth narrative.<sup>4</sup> We have overtures of this parturition theme from the beginning pages of Exodus, where the Hebrew people are fruitful in number, and two Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, are saving the Hebrew people through midwifing. Pardes highlights what is suddenly so obvious throughout the Exodus story: this is childbirth. We hear the people of God groaning and moaning under their slavery (2:23). This is the labor and pain of one preparing to go through birth. As Robert Alter’s translation of Exodus 6:9 as “shortness of breath” connects, it is also an echo of the word *ruah*, the Spirit/breath of God fluttering over the water in Genesis 1.<sup>5</sup> There is about to be a birth.

Pardes describes Egypt as “the womb” of the people of God and Moses being chosen as “a midwife” that is called to assist in delivery. God the Creator will “take out the people from the burdens of the land of Egypt” (Ex 6:7, Alter translation).<sup>6</sup> The labor is long and painful, with the marking of blood on the doorpost and the possibility of the death of the child lingering in the shadows. Delivery happens when the people pass through the broken waters of the Red

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses : A Translation with Commentary* (New York: New York : W.W. Norton & Co., [2004], 2004), 316-17.

<sup>4</sup> Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel : National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses : A Translation with Commentary*, 341.

<sup>6</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses : A Translation with Commentary*, 340.

Sea into their infancy. Here in the wilderness, we see what Pardes calls “the suckling years.” The people of God continuously journey towards the land of milk and honey which Pardes calls “a long process of maturation without end.”

Why does this birth imagery matter? Because the Creator God is continuing to give new birth and deliver. The Creator God will again in the giving of Jesus the Christ, sending of the Holy Spirit, and birth of the Church (see Chapter 5). And the Creator is not done. This life is still a birth story. There is still possibility for new birth which means, still possibility for hope. Remembering our birth story in the book of Exodus helps us name and find where we are in the story now and imagine possibility for deliverance. Let’s dig in deeper into this story.

#### **4.1.1 Marks of the Creator**

Paramount in the Exodus story is connecting that the god who “comes down to deliver” is the Creator God. There are all the patterns of the Creator: This is a God who delivers through water, creates order and rhythm, provides daily, commands rest, gives both freedom and limits, and creates a people. Who else could this be but the Creator?

In his masterful commentary on the book of Exodus, Old Testament and Creation Scholar Terence Fretheim roots the Exodus story in the God of Creation. Fretheim insists that it is a story of “cosmic significance,” that the “microcosmic” of the redeemed Hebrew people is “macrocosmic”; this is a story of redemption that reveals that God is the Creator and redeemer of the entire world.<sup>7</sup> Alter also supports this cosmic scope when he writes that the book of Exodus is written from “the perspective of the whole wide world of creation.” And “establishes the credentials of the God of Israel for all humankind.”<sup>8</sup> To be the chosen people is to be chosen *for the sake of the world*. The Exodus is a continuation of the relationship between Creator God and the creation in the book of Genesis as well as a “re-creation.”<sup>9</sup> When we see this type of creative work for the flourishing and care of the world, we know the Restless Weaver is at work.

In the Exodus story, Pharaoh and Egypt represent all forces that work against Creation; that is to say all powers and principalities working against life. Fretheim calls these “the anticreation forces of death.”<sup>10</sup> It is an apt definition for sin. To be against the sacredness and goodness of life is to be against God the Creator. The new Pharaoh “who does not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8) is the Pharaoh who seeks to destroy the fruitfulness of the Hebrew people. He will slowly take life by ruthless hard labor, what Robert Alter translates as “work...work...work.”<sup>11</sup> When oppression does not snuff out life, he commands midwives, companions to bring forth new life to become “dealers of death.”<sup>12</sup> This unnamed Pharaoh represents anti-creation forces

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<sup>7</sup> “Israel is chosen on behalf of God’s earth.” Fretheim, 14, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses : A Translation with Commentary*, 299, 361.

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Fretheim, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses : A Translation with Commentary*, 309.

<sup>12</sup> Fretheim, 33.



violently opposed to the God of life.<sup>13</sup> Such forces are at work anytime human creatures are seen as instruments that serve an economy. Pharaoh makes the Hebrew people slaves, subjecting them to hard work in brick and mortar. They are a tool of the Empire. The anti-creation identity is seen in the violation of the rhythms of work and rest the Creator orderly established. Denial of rest for any creature is an anti-life force. You violate rest, you violate God.

When the people of God cry out in their slavery, it is *the Creator* God (as opposed to the rival god Pharaoh) who hears their cry, sees their suffering and comes down to help. As Alter translates Exodus 2:25, “God saw the Israelites, and God knew.” Alter guides us that “knew” has no object in the translation; what did God know? “Presumably, God knew the suffering, the cruel oppression, the obligations of the covenant, and the plan God must undertake to liberate the enslaved people.”<sup>14</sup> Again, God’s seeing means God’s commitment to redemptive action, to “come down to rescue” (Ex 3:8). Fretheim notes, “God’s work in creation has been shown to be life-giving, life-preserving, and life-blessing. . . what God does in redemption is in the service of these endangered divine goals in and for the creation.”<sup>15</sup> To put it simply, there would be no goodness to redeem without the Creator. And only the Creator can deliver. God’s redemption—through the particularity of the chosen people Israel—is for the sake of the world. The people of God are chosen for God’s purpose: the redemption of all Creation. Fretheim calls this work re-creation. It reflects the intimate relationship between redemption and Creation. “Redemption is for the purpose of creation, a new life within the larger creation, a return to the world as God intended it to be.”<sup>16</sup>

And the Creator, as Fretheim notes, is *creative* in the means of redeeming the creation—through faithful women overlooked by empire as having no power, through a stuttering goat-herder in the wilderness, through the natural processes of the created world. Indeed, all nature will become involved in the battle between Pharaoh and Creator God between order and disorder, slavery and freedom, death and life. In the Plagues, we see the undoing of Creation and a return to the chaos and darkness of the First day of creation.<sup>17</sup> In God’s deliverance from watery chaos and bringing forth dry land, we see a return to Genesis One. This is birthing language; this is Genesis 1. God is creating again; God is creating a people who are free for worship of God alone.

#### **4.1.2 Freedom for fidelity and rest**

The mark of the redeemed and recreated people of God is freedom. But that freedom is to be lived out as fidelity to God.<sup>18</sup> Creatures are free to belong to God alone. Creatures must

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<sup>13</sup> Fretheim, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, 317.

<sup>15</sup> Fretheim, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Fretheim, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Fretheim, 129.

<sup>18</sup> Fretheim, 178.

observe Sabbath to remember their Creator and what it means to be a creature. Wirzba speaks of the modern decoupling of concepts of freedom and fidelity being at the root of ecological crisis.<sup>19</sup> Our Western and American value of freedom has come to be translated as *“I can do whatever I want with whatever I want and use as much as I want and have no responsibility or accountability to another creature.”* The value of freedom, so enshrined in our American sacred documents and ethos, has been equated the same as—*if not held higher than*—Christian fidelity. As Wirzba notes, “the Anthropocene is such a difficult challenge because it puts up for scrutiny and interrogation the fundamental aspirations that have guided various versions of progress, development, and success.”<sup>20</sup> One can see how Christian nationalism and capitalism become entwined with ecological crisis. But *“I’ll do whatever the hell I want”* has never had anything to do with the lordship of Christ. And God will redeem his people by showing himself greater than Pharaoh and leading them far from the economy and ways of Egypt.

The Creator God forms a people by returning them to the rhythm and order of Genesis 1. God saves by giving them a daily pattern for their freedom. There is daily provision of manna, but one cannot collect more than one needs for that day. There must not be hoarding. There must be observing of rest not only for the people of God, but for all creatures, including foreigners, slaves, and animals. This is a return to Genesis 1 and Yahweh as Lord. It is the restoration of order, rhythm, limits, and the daily feeding of all instead of chaos, disorder, and slavery. It is to delight in the provision and goodness of the Lord through Sabbath rest. It is to see that, as Fretheim imagines, “God’s dramatic actions are of one piece with daily blessings.”<sup>21</sup> It is then that “all might know the Lord is God” (Ex 29:46).

*“Sometimes when I am overwhelmed with despair about polar bears, and the fate of elephants and my grandchildren, I go and look at a tree,”* my mother vulnerably shares. There are those who would call this denial. But I would say otherwise. I would say my mother is engaging in faithful contemplation through Sabbath rest.

In his poem *The Peace of Wild Things*, Berry writes:

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time*

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<sup>19</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Fretheim, 183.

*I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

*This is my Father's world, we sing as a community of believers...*

*I rest me in the thought,  
of rocks and trees of skies and seas  
His hands the wonders wrought.*

Resting in the innate goodness and beauty of an oak tree is not escapism, but a remembering of our story. It is a window that leads us to the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This is Sabbath in its fullness.

*This is my Father's world,  
Oh let me never forget  
that though the wrong seems oft so strong  
God is the ruler yet  
This is my Father's world, the battle is not done  
Jesus who died shall be satisfied and Earth and heaven one.*

Sabbath leads us to the truth: It will be God the Creator who saves this world. This much has always been clear. It will be a radical inbreaking of the Creator of this world that can and, in faith, will redeem this World. This is our future, and this is hope.

This hope does not mean lack of engagement. As Paul rhetorically asks the Church in Rome, "Does grace mean we should go on sinning?" Paul uses the Greek equivalent of the phrase "Hell no" (Rm 6:1). We are called always to mastery among, to active shepherding, to living the way of Jesus, the faithful human creature (more to this in the next chapter). We are called to turn away from the sin of uncreation. And in the meantime, as God has always done, God's eyes will continue scanning all the earth looking for a willing one to strengthen (2 Chron 16:9). As my friend Jane says, "*In the face of great evil, God always raises up prophets.*"

#### **4.1.3 Exodus: Our continuing story.**

What does this mean for now?

What does remembering the story of the Exodus have to do with carbon emissions and industrial agriculture where the means don't seem to matter and endangered polar bears? What does it have to do with the worldwide refugee crisis and nuclearizing space and how climate change will affect the most vulnerable (poor) first and greatest?

The Exodus story is not merely a story of the past but a descriptive story for today. In this story:

- There is always a Pharaoh, representing anti-creation forces of death, hell-bent on taking life through hard labor and instrumental seeing in the name of power and an economy.
- There are those who are vulnerable—in need of deliverance and rescue—who groan and moan for a new life of possibility.
- There are those who are called to be midwives in God’s work of deliverance and to be Moses who “go say” to Pharaoh that it is time to release the creation from bondage.
- There are idols and rival gods to worship.
- There is a Creator God who sees and hears suffering and comes down to deliver. This God is “always able to do something fresh and different.” The hallmarks of this God’s ways of deliverance are new births and new creations, rhythm and order, provision, respect of limits, Sabbath rest for all Creation, and freedom to worship God alone.
- There are those being called as prophets in Creator/Redeemer God’s name for the sake of the world.

It is this prophetic task we turn our attention to for the rest of the chapter.

#### ***4.2 The calling to see: the prophetic task in the meantime.***

*Godly Play*, a Montessori-based catechism for children, defines a prophet as “someone who comes so close to God, and God comes so close to him/her, that person knows what is most important and must be done.”

The word prophet is often translated as “foreseer”, but this does not honor the prophet’s deep memory and mindfulness in the present moment. Though a prophet can imagine the future, this is not crystal ball gazing.

In his masterful work on the prophet Jeremiah, *Run with the Horses*, Eugene Peterson reflects on the work and imagination of the prophet:

The great masters of the imagination do not make things up out of thin air; they direct our attention to what is right before our eyes. Then they train us to see it whole—not in fragments but in context, with all the connections. They connect the visible with the invisible, the this with the that. They assist us in seeing what is around us all the time but which we regularly overlook. With their help we see it not as commonplace but as awesome, not as banal but as wondrous. For this reason the imagination is one of the essential ministries in nurturing the life of faith. For faith is not a leap out of the everyday but a plunge into its depths.<sup>22</sup>

This is the very definition of ecology.

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<sup>22</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 74.

A prophet's eyes are deeply committed to the past in remembrance, to full seeing, even if it is painful, in the present, which then engages the imagining of both destruction if nothing changes and possibility—with repentance—for the future.

The work of the prophet is to call people to live well, to live rightly—to *be human* [emphasis mine]. But it is more than a call to say something, it is a call to live out the message. The prophet must be what he or she says. The person as well as the message of the prophet challenges us to live up to *our creation, to live into our salvation—to become all that we are designed to be.*<sup>23</sup>

One can hear in these words the return to “In the beginning”—the remembering of who we are in the image of God, who we are, as Peterson says, “designed to be.” The prophetic task is a genesis task; it is to imagine the world as it was meant to be. Prophets wake people up to their Creator and to this sacred life. A faithful human existence cannot be sleepwalking.

Peterson continues:

A prophet lets people know who God is and what he is like, what he says and what he is doing. A prophet wakes us up from our sleepy complacency so that we see the great and stunning drama that is our existence, and then pushes us onto the stage playing our parts whether we think we are ready or not. A prophet angers us by rejecting our euphemisms and ripping off our disguises, then dragging our heartless attitudes and selfish motives out into the open where everyone sees them for what they are. A prophet makes everything and everyone seem significant and important—important because God makes it, or him, or her; significant because God is actively, right now, using it, or him, or her. A prophet makes it difficult to continue with a sloppy or selfish life. No job is more important, for what is more important than a persuasive presentation of the invisible but living reality, God? What is more important than a convincing demonstration of the eternal meaning of the visible, ordinary stuff of daily life?<sup>24</sup>

Notice the emphasis on seeing in these reflections—true seeing where we are both “sloppy and selfish” as well as “the great and stunning drama that is existence” and ultimately, “the invisible but living reality God.” A prophet is an ecologist, seeing connection among and relationships between. A prophet is a contemplative; she is one of absolute attention and wonder. This attention and wonder, as Peterson supports in his reflections, is not other-wordly or invisible, but seeing “the eternal meaning of the visible, ordinary stuff of daily life.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Peterson, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Peterson, 49-50.

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, 50.

The prophetic task is not gazing dreamily up in the clouds but having our eyes wide open on the ground. Again, we see that it is here—always here—where God creates, redeems, and sustains.

#### 4.2.1 The gift and burden of seeing

The first chapter explored the gift and calling of humans made in the image of God to see the goodness and sacredness of the Cosmos and creation and be committed to care as God is. The Psalms call us to rejoice and sing in the goodness of the created world, giving glory to God. We are invited to enjoy the world, to taste and see, to delight in the works of God's hands. We are invited to be creative as God is creative, to be generative in the image of God, to participate in the work of the reconciliation and transformation of the world God is bringing about in Christ (more on this in chapter 5). There is no way we can keep from singing and declaring the goodness of God when we truly see. Seeing is a blessing. Seeing always produces the fruit of thanksgiving: As we profess in the Great Eucharistic prayer: *"It is a good and joyful thing always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Almighty God, Creator."* Seeing opens us to awe, joy, reverence, and gratitude.

Seeing is also a great burden. The lives—and deaths—of prophets testify that those willing to truly see and tell the truth suffer.

Jeremiah laments:

*My joy is gone,  
Grief is upon me,  
My heart is sick.* (Jer 8:18)

*O that my head were a spring of water  
and my eyes a fountain of tears,  
so that I might weep day and night  
for the slain of my poor people!* (Jer 9:1)

*My heart is crushed within me;  
all my bones shake;  
I have become like a drunkard,  
like one overcome by wine,* (Jer 23:9)

Peterson says, "if we live realistically, with our eyes open, we see a lot of evil."<sup>26</sup> As the great preacher Fred Craddock proclaims, "it is hard to be a friend of God, you know what makes

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<sup>26</sup> Peterson, 55.

God toss and turn in the night.”<sup>27</sup> Intimacy with God will be intimacy—and empathy—with those who suffer. Prophets carry a bucket of tears and a bar over their backs in solidarity with the wounded Creation.

In our time, being a prophet will certainly mean both empathy with creaturely life that suffers and lamenting the unraveling. Our pain is ecological in that it sees the connection between all living things. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Orthodox Church, speaks to the interconnected nature of care for the poor and care for the earth as “two sides of the same coin.” In his work *Environment as the Responsibility for All*, he reflects:

Indeed, the way we treat those who are suffering is reflected in the way we approach the ecological crisis. And both of these in turn mirror the way we perceive the divine mystery in all people and things, the way that we kneel in prayer before the living God.

These are those who are called—on behalf of the world—to have eyes wide open and shed tears.

*“God always sends prophets in the face of great evil,”* my friend Jane says. *“It is when we realize that those prophets might be us,”* she continues.

Whereas we tend to image prophets as the mouthpiece of God, the study of Peterson reveals that it might be more accurate to use the metaphor of the eyes of God.<sup>28</sup> Prophets are those who have the courage and willingness to see as God sees: To really see what is going on, to see God’s desire and original intent, and to grieve that gap. It is only then the task of the prophet to share that vision.

Prophetic work is visionary work. The first vision God gives to Jeremiah is of an almond branch. As Peterson instructs us, the almond is in the shape of a human eye. The calling of Jeremiah will be one where he is to see as God sees. God will ask Jeremiah to gaze at the ordinariness of life and work around Jeremiah—consider an earthenware jug, a basket of figs, the buying of a field—to know God’s heart.<sup>29</sup>

Jeremiah, in seeing a boiling pot, also sees larger political and economic powers at work. When we are willing to see as God sees, we must also see the forces of empire. We see coming destruction and suffering if there is not a changed way. We see the Pharaohs and the Caesars,

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<sup>27</sup> I heard Craddock preach on the difficulty of being a friend of God at the Truett Alumni lunch at the CBF General Assembly ~2008. He picked up the thread of the difficulty of being God’s friend in several sermons including this one: Fred Craddock, “Being a Friend of God,” *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 189-190

<sup>28</sup> Peterson, as well as Davis, roots the life of the prophet Jeremiah in a calling to see. Peterson. Davis.

<sup>29</sup> See Peterson’s work on imagination and ordinary life, Peterson, 74-5.

the exile and Babylonian conquests of the world—those who Berry describes as “contradicting the fundamental miracle of life.”<sup>30</sup>

Berry expands, “A part of the normal practice of Caesar is his willingness to destroy the world.”<sup>31</sup> A prophet is willing to see and tell the truth about those who Philippians describes as hell-bent on destruction, “their god is their stomach and their glory is in their shame” (Ph 3:19). Prophets, as Berry continues, have the courage to affirm that God’s way is “not a religion of the state and the status quo” and proclaim the Gospel’s “bad news” of judgment of religion of the state.<sup>32</sup> Speaking the truth to power can—just like Jeremiah and Jesus—lead to public spectacle and humiliation.

There is no way to shortcut suffering if we are going to live with eyes open. There is no getting around the pain of seeing. *This does not mean the pain of seeing keeps us from the prophetic task. It is a necessary part.* The strength of the prophet will not be achieved, as Peterson warns “by growing calluses over a highly sensitive spirit.”<sup>33</sup>

But neither is true prophetic vision only seeing suffering. “You begin seeing with a keen eye” says the Elf Galadriel to Frodo after the death of Gandalf and the imagining of the burning of the Shire and the end of humanity in *The Lord of the Rings*. “Yet hope remains while all the Company is true,” she continues. True seeing always incorporates hope because of “the Company” we keep. The Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer is always part of the picture.

Peterson instructs:

If we are going to live in the world, attentive to each particularity, loving it through all the bad times without being repelled by it or afraid of it or conformed to it, we are going to have to face its immense evil, but know at the same time it is a limited and controlled evil.<sup>34</sup>

Seeing only death and despair is not seeing the full picture.

The vision of the prophet is beyond optimism and pessimism; It is of hope.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most famous quote from Jeremiah is “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans for a hope and a future” (Jer 29:11). What is often not on the t-shirt is the context of these words: Israel was in a state of exile, war, and suffering and being

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<sup>30</sup> Berry, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Berry, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Berry, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Peterson, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Greg Jones speaks of the unique character of Christian hope which both includes and transcends notions of optimism and pessimism. Andrew P. Hogue, and L. Gregory Jones, *Navigating the Future : Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Melbourne, AUSTRALIA: Abingdon Press, 2021), 115.



asked to settle down in the land of their enemies when this vision was given. The hopeful vision came in a time of suffering.

The Christian narrative does not shy away from terrible things happening, from whippings, crosses and crucifixions. The Gospel always proclaims the possibility of deliverance, that, in the words of Frederick Buechner, “the worst thing is not the last thing.”

To see this hopeful vision is to see Jesus the Christ.

## 5. CHAPTER FIVE

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### *Seeing how to be a human creature: Christology and Ecological crisis*

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross....”* —Colossians 1:15-20

*“She, supposing him to be the Gardener...”* —John 20:15

**We have seen** the violence that comes about when creatures try to be the Creator. The Fall is a story of falling from creaturely life in desire to be “godlike.” And the ultimate biblical story of idolatry and desecration—the catastrophe of the golden calf—is at its core, a destruction of the covenant relationship between creatures and God. It is when we create “other gods”—idols—to look to for meaning, security, and identity instead of the “God who delivered us from slavery in Egypt.” Our journey of faith is not to become godlike, but to be a true human creature. It is to embrace creaturely life.

But humans cannot do this without seeing what a true human creature looks like. To say it differently, how do we know what a faithful human is to look like, think like, act like? How do we know what we are to grow *into*? We need an image—an example. We need to see a truly faithful human life.

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I scowl in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, turning around to see the backside of the skirt, running my hands down my thighs to smooth the black linen fabric. Despite 43 years to gain something called perspective, I haven’t made peace with the Brashear family hips. I am still at war with cellulite on the temple.

The truly frightening thing is not this moment between the mirror and me, as embarrassing as it is. It is the eyes that are watching from the hallway that I cannot see. My now 14-year-old Olivia—my perfect baby with her downy skin, blue eyes and long neck, is now craning around the corner watching my interaction with this mirror.

I don’t want her to see this moment.

I have spent a decade cheerleading—trying to drown out the booming voices of Kardashians, Botox ads and the cosmetic industry:

*“You are perfect!”*

*“Your body is a gift.”*

*“Bodies are meant to be functional, not decorative!”*

But this quiet interaction, where she watches her mother look at herself, speaks the loudest.

Children inherit their sense of self-concept from watching another. And what we do speaks much louder than what we say. My daughter will look to my attitude and relationship with my body to learn the value of her own. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson’s fifth stage of human development is “Identity vs. role confusion.” The work of this stage is described as “mirroring”—of looking to others and differentiating our own identities. In child development, the first mirror is a parent. The mirror changes to peers in the teenage years as we grow in strength of self-concept. But my relationship with my body will be her first lesson on the worth of her own.

I take comfort that there are hopefully other moments she has witnessed—my daily commitment to swimming and running and the pleasure I experience in this movement, the joy of breaking out dancing to *Shake It Off* in the kitchen and the delight of cherry bark ice cream we both share. The years that my body spent growing and feeding her baby brother. The way I handle myself when I am sick or sad or screwing up.

It is never just a personal thing with bodies. Maybe that is why the Apostle Paul speaks of the body so much when talking about communities of faith. It is never just about one person, but undeniable connection. There is an ecology to the body.

Paul also speaks of the body needing a head, of needing something to give direction and order. We need a prototype: We need an image. We need a parent or other trusted one to show us what we are to grow *into*. We need a faithful person to show us what it means to be a Christian. And we need a Creator to reveal what it means to be a creature.

### ***5.1 Jesus the prototype***

In his highly accessible book *Christianity’s Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*, C. Kavin Rowe claims that the key questions of all ethics are what is our story and what is a human being? The Christian faith offers “the story of everything” that Christ is both the true human and that every human is Christ. Rowe affirms that at the center of the surprise of Christianity is “the revelation of the human as the image of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> “When you see something show up as human, what you are seeing is Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rowe, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kavin Rowe in class lecture, Duke Divinity School, 2021. See also Rowe.

Rowe elaborates:

(Jesus the Christ) is not God's image in the sense of a reflection that mirrors but does not capture the fullness of the real thing. He is instead the way God images himself in the history of creation...the total history of God's image, that is, has been aimed at this: God images himself fully and completely in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus in the *Imago Dei*...Jesus of Nazareth is the human. All other humans are his image.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is the prototype. To look at Jesus is to see all of God and all the human creature is to become.

Williams brings all this to fruition in the very title of his work, *Christ the Heart of Creation*. Though dense in metaphysical language, the former Archbishop of Canterbury takes us deeply into the mystery of Trinity. "Only the Creator can exhibit fully what it means to be a creature."<sup>4</sup> This is a revelation—from outside all that is made, which only the Creator could disclose. And the image of faithful creaturely life is perfectly seen in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. "This specific performance of finitude or creatureliness is to be identified as the self-disclosure of the infinite."<sup>5</sup> We profess this in the Church every week in our confession that Jesus is both "fully God and fully human."

As Williams leads us, "Christology is a key to the 'logic of creation' because Christ appears as the *perfectly creaturely*... (in him we) realize what humanity itself is called to be."<sup>6</sup>

This is why the early Church came to call Jesus of Nazareth the Second Adam or the New Adam. As Rowe says, following the Apostle Paul, "(In Jesus) there is a *new creation* [emphasis mine]—the human redone, its possibilities renewed, its requirements amplified, and its true identity (re)disclosed."<sup>7</sup> This is the work of the Creator.

Our reading of Scripture moves forward *as well as backward*. It is not only that Christ is the true Adam but that the *adam*—the one from the soil—is Christ. "The Adam, that is, was the image of Jesus Christ all along, the one who had now come in time as Adam returned."<sup>8</sup> Returning to Genesis One, "the image in whose image the human is made is the Son of God Jesus."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rowe, 36

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 239

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 226

<sup>7</sup> Rowe, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Rowe, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Rowe, 40.

Most fascinatingly, Walter Brueggemann chooses to begin his commentary on the book of Genesis with the opening of the book of Ephesians:

*“For [as] he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”* (Eph 1:9-10)

Why would a renowned Old Testament scholar choose to begin Genesis with a quote from a New Testament Epistle? Far from Christian supersessionism, Brueggemann affirms, “The ultimate purpose of Creation is found *in the heart of the Creator* [emphasis mine].”<sup>10</sup> Unity, order, and obedience are intended and decided “in the beginning.” As Brueggemann says, “God will stay with the creation until it is so...God will create by speaking in ways that will finally be heard.”<sup>11</sup> The heart of the Creator will finally be heard in Jesus.

The chorus of Michael Card’s song “Final Word” is a beautiful reflection of this Creation Christology:

*He spoke the Incarnation and then so was born the Son.  
His final word was Jesus, He needed no other one.*

### **5.1.1 Jesus: The Creator at work**

Rowan Williams’s *Tokens of Trust, An Introduction to Christian Belief*, written for those undergoing catechism at Lent, says it with simple elegance: In Jesus God is supremely and uniquely at work...without interruption.”<sup>12</sup> The Creator is about the same good, grace-filled, generative work we saw in Genesis and the Exodus story: accomplishing new birth and creation from the water of Mary’s womb and the waters of the Jordan at Jesus’ baptism, calling to vocation, feeding the hungry, delivering from slavery to sin and death, giving new birth from water and the Spirit, and returning humanity to a life-affirming pattern of work and rest. And all this, as is the hallmark of the Creator God, is for the life of the beloved world.

#### **5.1.1.1 The revelation of the flesh**

To be a proper creature in this world, we must look to Jesus the Christ. And when we look to Jesus Christ, we see one who has flesh. Rowe reflects “To be made in the image of God is to have flesh. When we see the human enfleshed, we see the image of Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

Rightfully following this logic leads to proper ethical action toward other human creatures. We know that when we are encountering a human, we are encountering Christ. Rowe leads us

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2010), 57, 62-3.

<sup>13</sup> Rowe, 40.

to the scene of The Judgment between sheep and goats at the end of Matthew. How we treat the least these—the hungry, poor, naked, thirsty—is how we treated Christ himself. It is not that humans are like Christ, but that they *are* Christ.

Here we learn to read Scripture both forward and backward. In beginning, God declares the goodness of all God creates. And the coming of “the Word made flesh” is the image of the invisible God, the fullness of God bodily, the full expression of grace and truth. We move backwards knowing what the true human and proper creature is by contemplating the life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is our formation of coming to name the flesh as good. And we see what it means to live as a proper creature, and how to practice “mastery among” the Creation, by contemplating the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospels.

The incarnation is also a revelation of what the flesh is: To be a body is not to be inherently evil. (a Christian heresy known as Manichaeism) Humans are not spirits living within bodies. Humans *are* bodies. The revelation of God is flesh.

#### **5.1.1.2 Paul and the flesh**

This can be very confusing and jarring for those who have the Apostle Paul’s words ringing in our ears about “the flesh being weak” and “flesh and blood not inheriting the kingdom of God.” But that is the confusion of our own time, not the Bible’s. What Paul is speaking of is not life in the body being bad and other life elsewhere being good, but life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit. Both are here. And life in the Spirit is not disembodied life, but concrete expressions of faith, hope and love in concrete action here. To say it differently, it is not life in the spirit (lower case) as in a disembodied life elsewhere but living in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit here with real fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. N.T. Wright’s book on the Resurrection, *A Sure and Certain Hope*, seeks to be a corrective to much confusion about Christian belief inside and outside the church about life after death and is helpful here. Wright teaches that when Paul speaks of being “absent from the body” he is speaking of an intermediate state between the first death and the final bodily resurrection here.<sup>14</sup> The good news of Grace is God coming down to Earth and never humanity escaping embodied, created life. Wirzba often and cleverly speaks of us often suffering from “a failure of incarnational nerve.” The Good news of grace is always and forever that God not only created and called embodied life good but chose to dwell within flesh.

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<sup>14</sup> For a thorough treatment of life after death and the Resurrection in Pauline thought, see NT Wright’s *Surprised by Hope*.

The hymn “Good is the Flesh” expresses this beautifully:

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,  
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,  
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,  
good is the body for knowing the world,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,  
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,  
feeling, perceiving, within and around,  
good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,  
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,  
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,  
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,  
good is the body, for good and for God,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.<sup>15</sup>

## ***5.2 Saved by the faithfulness of the true human***

We have one who embodies right relationship between Creator and creature. We have one who reveals how to be, in the words of Williams, “properly creaturely.”<sup>16</sup> We have one in whom we are to “in all things grow up into” (Eph 4:15). We are to become the fullness of the image of Jesus Christ.

This must be at least part of what we confess when we say, “We are saved by the faithfulness of Christ” (Rom 3:3,22; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9, Eph 3:12). It is not our faith that saves us, it is Jesus being the faithful Creature, the true human, “the final word.” He can properly restore the fallen relationship between creaturely life and its Creator. He can pattern a “properly creaturely” life by showing us what to do with our minds, hearts, and wills. He can birth a new creation—the new creature. He can both see the good intention of the original creature and provide a prototype of restoration. He reveals who we are and how we are to live.

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<sup>15</sup> Brian A Wren (lyrics) Ron Klusmeier (music), *Good Is the Flesh*, Piece Together Praise (Carol Stream: Hope Publishing Company, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 238.

This is how we are redeemed and freed to live faithfully. This is how we know how we are to live ecologically, that is to say—in right relationship with all else. Because of the generosity of the Creator giving a faithful life, in showing us proper creaturely response.

Williams concludes:

In association with the Word incarnate, redeemed humanity is set free to respond to its primordial vocation (me: aka. Gardening) to become (as Bonhoeffer would have it) answerable for creation's good order and preservation through the exercise of supernatural charity in respect to both other humans and to other creatures in general.<sup>17</sup>

Christ is indeed offered, “for the life of the world.”

Schmemmann says it eloquently and best with sacramental language:

There must be someone in this world—which rejected God and in this rejection, in this blasphemy, became a chaos of darkness—there must be someone to stand in its center, and to discern, *to see it again* as full of divine riches, as the cup full of life and joy, as beauty and wisdom, and to thank God for it. This ‘someone’ is Christ, the new Adam who restores that eucharistic life which I, the old Adam, had rejected and lost; who makes me again what I am, and restores the world to me. And if the Church *is in Christ*, its initial act is always this act of thanksgiving, of returning the world to God.<sup>18</sup>

The question is, will we embrace life in the flesh as much as God has?

### ***5.3 Creation theology in the Gospels***

**From the beginning** of each Gospel, there is a clear callback to the Creation story. What is happening in Christ is a continuation of the Creation event. The Gospels are rightly read with the ability to hear what Richard Hays calls echoes of the Scriptures. This form of figural reading helps us to hear these resonances of the grand three-fold story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.<sup>19</sup>

The beginning of each Gospel account returns us to Genesis. The Gospel of Mark, in the first sentence, as well as the Title for the whole work, declares “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” (Mk 1:1). It is here we return to a Spirit like a dove hovering over Jesus the beloved Son, just as the Spirit of God hovered over the primordial waters like a fluttering mother Eagle (Mk 1:10). The Spirit is stretching wings of anointing power over the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew takes us to genealogy, for connection and continuation to the grand narrative of the Genesis family (Mt Chapter 1). Luke to the genesis of a birth narrative

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Schmemmann, 75.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).



with angels and songs and a stable and the announcement from heavenly messengers of “good news for all people” to the poor who are “shepherding” the Creation (Lk 2). And the Prologue of John, most obviously, referring to “In the beginning” of Genesis (Jn 1:1). All four Gospels lead us to water and the presence of the Holy Spirit marking a new creation. Our Scriptural memory tells us that what is happening in Jesus is the Creation work of God—bringing order out of chaos, declaring goodness, naming as beloved, revealing identity, and giving work to the human to do. The temptation story of Jesus reflects where Adam failed by wanting to be godlike, and how Jesus will fully embrace his humanity in humility, thus revealing what it means to be a faithful human (more to this soon).

For now, we see that in each Gospel what is happening in the life of Jesus is a new Creation. I intentionally capitalize Creation, because it is not merely something fresh and unparalleled happening in Jesus of Nazareth, but the redemption of a precise vision of an ecology of creaturely life as seen in Genesis. As the work of Sean M. McDonough leads us, Christ’s role as Redeemer means “putting things back to the way they were supposed to be in the beginning.”<sup>20</sup> McDonough calls creation theology in the Gospels “the flower of meditation on the stories of Jesus’ wonder-working activity.”<sup>21</sup> As Jesus walks on the primordial waters, drives out evil, miraculously feeds, and offers the gift of breath to Lazarus, we naturally say “*these are things only the Creator God can do.*” To see the work of Jesus is to see the work of the Creator.

This is where we begin to need to speak of God as Trinity. To speak of one member of the Trinity is to necessarily speak of the Other. God the Creator is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus the Son which proceeds from the Father and the Son. As McDonough urges, attending well to the stories of Jesus naturally leads to the pondering of the question “Who is this man?” and the (theo)logical conclusion that he must be the agent of Creation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford New York: Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2009., 2009), 30.

<sup>21</sup> McDonough, 20.

<sup>22</sup> From McDonough:

The mighty works of Jesus, his proclamation of the kingdom of God, and the climatic events of the crucifixion and resurrection, clearly marked him as the definitive agent of God’s redemptive purposes. But these mighty works could scarcely be divorced from God’s creative acts. The memories of Jesus preserved in the gospels depict a man who brings order to the threatening chaotic waters, creates life out of death, and restores people to their proper place in God’s world. In Jürgen Moltmann’s elegant formulation, Jesus’ healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly “natural” thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized, and wounded. Reflections on these memories of Jesus, coupled with the experience of forgiveness and renewal on the part of the early Church, led to a startling but elegant (theo)logical conclusion: If the one true God had sent Jesus the Messiah as the definitive agent of redemption, and if this redemption was at one level simply the outworking of the project of creation (a view with ample precedent in the Hebrew Bible and indeed the Ancient Near East in general), it must be that the Messiah was the agent of creation as well. McDonough, 3,22.

A thorough reckoning with each Gospel and its echoes of Creation theology is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that the Synoptics reveal Jesus to be the one who has authority in teaching and driving out demons (pointing toward authorship of the Created world), the one who calms the sea (bringing order out of primordial chaos, something God the Creator alone can do), is Lord of the Sabbath (the Sabbath honors the Creator as God) and raises the dead (only the Creator gifts breath). The Gospels are Creation stories.

It is the Gospel of John which provides an extraordinary connection between the first creation account in Genesis One and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We will spend the remainder of the Chapter examining John with Genesis eyes.

### 5.3.1 Creation theology in the Gospel of John

McDonough views the Gospel of John not as an early dappling in connecting Christ to Creation, but a well-developed theology. He writes, “John's Gospel begins with a bald assertion of Jesus' agency in creation. The Gospel, in its final form and taken as a whole, represents the culmination of the early Church's reflections on Christ and creation, rather than the inception.”<sup>23</sup> The conclusion: if you want to “see” the fruit of Creation theology in the Early Church’s reflections on the life of Jesus, look to John.

The Gospel of John begins by taking us (back?) to the first Chapter of Genesis:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”* (Gen 1:1-2)

The Prologue of John is the lectionary reading for Christmas Eve each year. As a youth, when the lights in the sanctuary were turned out and the words “*In the beginning was the Word...*” were read, I knew this was a Creation story as much as if I had heard the words “*Once upon a time*” I would know to expect a fairy tale. To say it in Johannine language: it was “plain as day” that this was a Creation story. McDonough describes John as a Gospel who “wears its theology on its sleeve.”<sup>24</sup> This testimony about Christ in the Gospel of John has everything to do with Creation and God the Creator. It is a witness to the one in which “*all things came into being and without not one thing came into being*” (Jn 1:3). This is a beautiful harmony to the Colossian hymn praising the cosmic Christ “through” and “for” and “by” which all things were made (Col 1:15-20).

The *logos*, or divine wisdom of God, is the key to understanding Creator and Creature.

In his exploration of the logic of Creation, Wirzba reflects,

The man Jesus of Nazareth isn’t only the embodiment and full realization of what it means to be a human creature. In his ways of being he is also the Christian key to the

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<sup>23</sup> McDonough, 33.

<sup>24</sup> McDonough, 33.

logic of creation as a whole, specifying the character of the divine power that creates...by attending to his Life (Jesus), a space opens through which all life can be perceived and engaged as the sacred reality that it is.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus is the divine revelation of both God and all God creates.

Like the first creative act of God separating light from darkness, this “life” is the “light of all people” (Jn 1:4)—the one who “shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” (Jn 1:5) This one is the light that allows all to see, “the true light which enlightens all people” (Jn 1:9). This life allows those who “live in the darkness” who do not recognize who God is, to see.

The invitation of the Gospel of John is to “Come and See” (Jn 1:39). This is the call of discipleship—not some special knowledge (gnosis) or consent to intellectual ideas about God (repeat these words of the sinner’s prayer and you will be saved). It is to come close to Jesus, to remain in him, to feed off him, and to learn to be a true human. It is *meno*, the key verb in the Gospel of John, often translated as “to abide” or “to remain.” John gives us the metaphor of a vine being fed within a branch to imagine this relationship. We as disciples are called to grow within the one who is “close to the Father’s heart” (Jn 1:18). To come into this bond is to come within a redeemed relationship between Creator and creature because in the life of Jesus the Christ we have seen what it means to be both.

*What* are we allowed to see? What does the light reveal? The heart of the Creator, who is the Father Jesus prays to. This one has dwelled “close to the heart of God” Another translation reads “from the Father’s bosom.” Here again, is a return to our parturition imagery.

### **5.3.1.1 Remaining with the one who feeds us**

I was the sole source of Olivia’s food her first six months of life. This was after being her sole source of nourishment for nine months in utero. This body. This relationship.

This child woven together in the depths of me was fed by my bloodstream and rested close to my heart. My body could continue to transform whatever I ate, from a drive-through burrito to the finest steak into nourishment for her. It is a well-established fact that a female body will take what it needs to feed a baby well from the mother’s own body; even going so far as to turn teeth and bones into chalk to leach calcium.

*“For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink”* (Jn 6:55).

This miracle of feeding another with your body is experienced by female creatures. Yet, the miracle of being fed and nurtured—grown within—another’s body is shared by all creatures. We are all fed by the Other. No one feeds herself.

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<sup>25</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World*, 168.

Many (male) theologians partake in endless debate about the sacraments, using words such as transubstantiation and arguing whether or not the supper is a form of cannibalism and the strange command of Jesus to eat his flesh and drink his blood in the Gospel of John. Why is this so? Did we not all feed on another to have life and feed another from our bodies to give life? Have we lost any sense of imagination that the God who created us and we call Parent would feed us just the same?

This is abiding. This is ecology. It is the closeness of the relationship between Parent and Child. God is one who abides with us, who feeds us, who sees to our needs, who is always at work for the flourishing of the child. To draw close to Jesus is to draw close to the Parent/Creator.

This one-of-a-kind revelation is both particular and universal. In other words: it revealed the scandal of particularity of God in a particular culture, body, gender, and geography. But Jesus also revealed the heart and intent of God *for all time*. Here we see again what Fretheim described of the choosing of Israel for the sake of the world, “the microcosm for the macrocosm.”<sup>26</sup> Wirzba says, “To encounter Jesus was to meet a human being, but it was also to meet the eternal power and life of God. To perceive what Jesus was doing in a particular place and time – in the flesh – was also to perceive what God has been doing everywhere from all of eternity.”<sup>27</sup>

Again, what is revealed is how to be a true creature. In Christ, we are children of God who feed at the breast of our Creator. We are those who live in a dependent relationship on our Parent God. We feed upon the bread of life. We are those who exist within the Vine, who can only grow and produce fruit through abiding relationship in God (Jn 15). We are invited to walk into a new way of creaturely living through the one who is a Gate (Jn 10:9). We are cared for by this God who, in an agrarian image which takes us back to skilled mastery, is the good shepherd (Jn 10:11-19). We follow God and God will give his life for the sheep. We discover that God is both the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25).

### 5.3.1.2 Come and See

How do we see? Because “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us” (Jn 1:14). Because this one is the very image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).

Peterson paraphrases the end of the Prologue of John:

*This endless knowing and understanding—  
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.  
No one has ever seen God,  
not so much as a glimpse.*

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<sup>26</sup> Fretheim, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World*, 169.

*This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,  
who exists at the very heart of the Father,  
has made him plain as day.*

To say it differently (and with insight from McDonough) meditating on the stories of Jesus—the life of Jesus as accounted in the rest of John’s Gospel, will bring us to the conclusion that John gives us in the Prologue: Jesus is the light of all things, the one through whom the world was Created, the one “in the beginning with God” (Jn 1:1-2). John has arrived at this place of cosmic theological reflection after having looked at the very earthly life of Jesus: His attendance at a wedding, his conversations with Nicodemus, his feeding of people, and healing, his raising of Lazarus, and his death and the witness in the Garden to the Resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

As Wright concludes, “Incarnation is the center and fulfillment of the long-term plan of the good and wise creator.”<sup>29</sup> This one is the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19). In this one God the Creator was “pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or heaven” (Col 1:20). To see Jesus is to see God the Creator and Reconciler of all Creation.

*“We have seen the glory of the one God, full of grace and truth.”* —Jn 1:14

As Wirzba says, “Seeing how Jesus lived his life and the way he moved his body, these Christians also believed that they saw what creaturely life is fundamentally about and what it is ultimately for.”<sup>30</sup> Eyes are hungry to see meaning. This meaning comes primarily in who we are declared to be (beloved good creatures, children of God) and the tasks we are given to do (pray, forgive, heal, feed, serve, reconcile, be vulnerable, abide, and give our lives). To put it quite simply, Jesus shows us how to live.

“We would see Jesus,” outsiders proclaim to the disciples at Passover (John 12:20-22).

The invitation of the Gospel of John is to come and see where Jesus stays—where he “abides” (Jn 1:39). Seeing is not accomplished with the eyes alone, but with the feet. It is an understanding that comes from walking a human life with the True human. To see one must journey with Jesus and walk alongside. Seeing is not a distant engagement, but a walking of life with this one. In him, we find the new creation which echoes and finishes the original good creation. As the Gospel of John shows us, the life of Jesus is both an echo of Genesis and a new creation. It is to see heavenly things flood to earth in the person of Jesus (Jn 1:51).

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<sup>28</sup> McDonough provides great insight into this theological development in John: “The logic of John’s theological development is from past to Prologue. John wishes his readers/hearers to believe that Jesus is the Christ (with all that entails, including his creative activity) by means of his recitation of Jesus’ words and deeds. It would seem plausible that his own spiritual journey proceeded on a similar path.” McDonough, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World*, 169.

What we are invited to see, through Jesus, is new birth from above through the power of the Holy Spirit (see Jesus' invitation to Nicodemus, Jn 3:3). Through relationship, abiding in the presence of God in Christ, we are given eyes to see the future kingdom breaking in in our midst. The light of the world, which enlivens all, makes clear for us a new way of living that restores the original intent of creation. Those who see by the light of Jesus "never walk in darkness but have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). The life of Jesus is, as Eugene Peterson translates John One, is "light to live by." We are invited to imagine the world as God imagines it, and through the Holy Spirit, to be a part of the creative process through our faithful feet. The Prologue of John witnesses that all who look to Jesus he "makes into their true selves, their child of God selves" (Jn 1:12, *Peterson translation*).

The incarnation of Jesus Christ echoes the Old Testament account of God's examining Creation. It is Jesus who first sees Nathanael under the fig tree (Jn 1:48), who sees the man born blind (Jn 9). Jesus speaks of God's character in being like a loving father scanning the horizon for the prodigal while he is still a long way off. Prevenient grace is that always God first sees—and thus seeks—us.

The invitation of Jesus is that we would come and see, as God sees. That requires acknowledging our own blindness.

### **5.3.1.3 Blindness**

As the Gospel of John emphasizes, acknowledging our own blindness is required for God to give us sight (John 9:1-41). The religious leaders, insisting on all they can see, draw Jesus' condemnation and rebuke that they are "blind guides" (John 9:39-41). It is those who repeatedly confess what they do not know (the man born blind who declares this three times in Jn 9) that receive the Light of the World. Jesus declares that he came to give vision to the blind and to blind those who profess that they can see (Jn 9:39). What is required is a radically different way of seeing, a new birth that can only be given from above.

This echoes the lesson of the good order of Creation, humans are always those with limited vision. Only God fully sees. The humble acknowledgment of our blind spots as created beings is the only posture in God granting us vision.

As Jesus' healing and preaching reveal, our coming to see is at times radical and at others gradual. Crowds are attracted because "of seeing the signs Jesus was doing for the sick" (Jn 6:2). Through John's Gospel, we see those who encounter Jesus having a gradual and growing awareness of who he is. Nicodemus has great difficulty seeing the identity of Jesus because of what he professes that he knows (Jn 3:2). The Samaritan woman at first sees Jesus as someone who shares a common religious heritage, then a prophet, then Messiah, then "I am" (Jn 4). Likewise, the man born blind first recognizes Jesus as a prophet before receiving the revelation that Jesus is the Son of Man (Jn 9). We do not see fully and often think literally, "earthly things instead of heavenly." Jesus insists on being born again and Nicodemus tries to reason climbing back in his mother's womb. Jesus claims that he is the bread of life, yet the people see no

further than their own stomachs (Jn 6). What we see can even offend (Jn 6:61-62). But our blindness and confusion can also testify to Jesus being the agent of Creation.

#### **5.3.1.4 Jesus the Gardener: The truth in the Mistaken Identity.**

It is Mary Magdalene who is blind to seeing Jesus, mistaking him for the gardener. There is great truth in this mistaken identity. It is a return to the Garden of Genesis, to God putting things right again. It is this agrarian image, of God as a farmer, that is our first image given of Resurrected Life. Seeing Christ as the Gardener of the Good Creation, working toward redemption and fruit, is the image of our resurrected future. Only when Jesus sees Mary and calls her name does she recognize Jesus and makes her full Easter proclamation: *“I have seen the Lord! (Jn 20:18)”*

As we have heard several times, Jesus the Christ reveals what humanity is to be. And the image is a gardener. Our calling from the beginning is to be gardeners. It is to live humbly and closely to the land as we are “masters among” other creatures.

It is also a revelation of a proper creaturely posture. That image is of humankind living humbly on their knees, working the soil and living closely with the Earth. The word human is closely related to the word humility. Both derive from the word *humus*, the top layer of soil. Humans are those who come from the dust of the ground and will return to this earth. Our heritage and our destiny are the soil. And a proper creaturely life abides closely to this soil. It is a call to literally be “down to earth.” Jesus repeatedly points us downward—to contemplation of mustard seeds, yeast, a pearl, a child—to describe the way of the kingdom “among us” and coming.

The heart of Jesus’ revelation of God is expressed in the ancient Christian hymn Philippians 2:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form  
of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point  
of death—  
even death on a cross.”* Philippians 2:5-8

What we see in Jesus is the revelation that to be God is to take up a towel, bend down and wash feet. It is to be a servant, to be last. It is to be the Son of Man. It is to forgive, to heal, and to grieve. It is to weep in the losses of death. It is to give your life as a ransom for many. It is the one on the cross. It is to empty-self, to take the form of a servant. It is the way down.

Williams reflects:

God alone is free to reveal to us that divinity is precisely not that elevated state of supernaturalized humanity that we often imagine, the possession of a set of powers that magnify human capacity so that it can transcend the limits of time and body...what is specifically Christian is the making visible of the invisible God in “the form of a man like any other (Phil. 2:7); over against the drive of the world of original sin to be ‘like God’, the God who alone ‘wholly God,’ appears as ‘wholly man.’<sup>31</sup>

The conclusion is startling. As Williams simply and elegantly affirms “Divine patience, acceptance of limit, is the door which opens on to radical transformation.”<sup>32</sup> What Jesus the Christ reveals, as Williams says, is an “**affirmation of the ordinary...what is Christian is what is properly creaturely.**”<sup>33</sup>

Incarnation is an embrace of this earthly life.

This is a radically different message than cultural values which encourage us, from an early age, to reach for the stars and to deny any limits. The (well-meaning) message I most often heard as a child was “you can be anything you want to be” and “do what you want to do.” While acknowledging the injustices and obstacles that keep too many children from imagined tomorrows (another form of denying humanity), we must ask if the denial of limits from an early age is preparing us well to live a faithful and ecologically responsible life. In a culture that worships flying superheroes, to be earth-bound is too ordinary, too confining, too mortal.

But Jesus the Christ reveals the way down is the way up. To be truly and powerfully and sacredly human is to live downward.

Williams, referring to both Augustine and Przywara, says “Union with the immaterial and transcendent God can only occur in union with the suffering, struggling, compromised body/Body on earth, living out God’s descent in the depths.”<sup>34</sup> This is taking up the cross in the self-emptying manner of Christ Jesus.

Williams, following Przywara again, speaks of how works of art project “splendor, opulence and elaboration” onto God and the need to “break through—or back—to the primal realities of incarnate simplicity, even anonymity, to the humility of (the) ordinary.”<sup>35</sup> The Christian life

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 238.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 238.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 238.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 248.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 245.



becomes “the patient embrace of finitude” and “valuing of the unspectacular...that the paradoxical radiance of the infinite (might) become visible.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, our limits and creatureliness do not offend God, they reveal God. Paul reflects on boasting in weakness for that is where Christ is made strong (2 Cor 12:9-11). Nothing about creaturely life is offensive or ungodlike. In the exact opposite, faithful creaturely life brings forth a life of “prayer and praise” as revealed by Christ the Son.<sup>37</sup>

Williams continues:

Christian aesthetics is not about genius-driven or near-magical transmutations of this world into some imagined semblance of divine glory and abundance, but the gift of unlocking in the most ordinary setting or object the “grace of sense” that allows it to be seen with durable, attentive love.<sup>38</sup>

This is true contemplation: Not seeing beyond to another world but seeing more deeply into the reality of this holy world. We are called to “enter into the deepest unity with God’s endless life through a sacrificially attentive engagement with the matter of this world.”<sup>39</sup> This is embracing limits, including death, even as we hope in what God is able to do with death.<sup>40</sup>

There are many threads of meaning we can draw from this revelation. One of the most obvious is *to touch and smell and work the soil beneath our own feet*. It is to cultivate an intimate relationship with the place you are planted. This requires realizing that you are planted. It means going for walks in the neighborhood, learning the names of your neighbors, planting something in the ground, listening for the sounds around your house. This will naturally lead to other questions: what type of bird is this, what time does the sun set, what planting zone do we live in, when is the first freeze historically, why does this plant grow everywhere here? It is not seeking to be somewhere else or someone else. It is an embrace of the “scandal of particularity” of our time and place.

Secondly, to embrace our own limits as creatures fosters a deeper awareness and empathy for the limits of other creatures. Sabbath—the sign of God’s covenant with Israel—was the patterned, regular practice of limits that the generosity and goodness of creation might be celebrated. The Sabbath command was not just for humans, but also for livestock and the land. The embrace of human limits is intertwined with the flourishing of all creaturely life, land, and water. “All are related.”

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 245.

<sup>37</sup> In *Tokens of Trust*, Williams guides us to embrace that the telos of the Christian life is a life of prayer and praise.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 247.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 252-53

<sup>40</sup> In her 2021 Pentecost sermon “I do not know how to do this part”, Nadia Wolz Webber said, “The Holy Spirit sees death, darkness and hopeless and says ‘finally, something I can work with.’ This is the infinite power of God through creaturely life. The heart of the Christian faith is that God raised the crucified Christ.

And lastly, faithfulness to the Christian story asks us to question and swim against the current of the dominant narrative of progress and upward mobility. Said simply, to embrace humble creaturely life is to reject visions of grandeur. Super-human or other-worldly stories are not the story revealed by God the good Creator in Christ.

Ultimately, incarnation is solidarity with the creation.<sup>41</sup> Jesus reveals God's solidarity not only in being fully human himself, but in the message he constantly proclaimed: the kingdom of God. And Jesus celebrates the kingdom of God is here, among us, as God is present in Christ with us. Wright challenges us that the kingdom of God "refers not to a post-mortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"<sup>42</sup> Heaven in the Bible, as Wright reaffirms, is not a future dimension but a *present* reality; "the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life."<sup>43</sup>

When Jesus taught on the kingdom of God, he helped people to see small often unnoticed elements of the creation: seeds, yeast, a pearl and children. Jesus was saying "it is here, among you, that God's presence and power are alive and active, if you have eyes to see. As Wirzba often says, "Stop looking up and away, Look down and here for where God is at work."

Jesus picked up a seed to help his disciples see the meaning of his own life and future. He must die and be buried in the earth, that he might rise again in a new resurrected form to be the first fruit of a great harvest. It is to the "sure and certain hope" of the Resurrection. It leads us to profess, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "*I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.*" It is the future Resurrection, and the calling of humanity in the meantime, that we will consider in our final chapter.

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<sup>41</sup> With thanks to Brian McLaren for this thought.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Wright, 18-19.

## 6. CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

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### *The first fruit of a Resurrected Creation...and the meantime.*

*“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”* —John 12:24

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”* —Revelation 21:1-2

*“Hope lives in the means, not the ends.”* —Wendell Berry

### **6.1 Resurrection: The affirmation of flesh and creaturely life**

Resurrection is the absolute affirmation of the goodness of the flesh and this creaturely life. It reveals the continued commitment of the Creator to this World. It holds together our Trinitarian understanding. Creation and New Testament theologian Sean McDonough insists “The idea of Jesus as agent of creation is of course unthinkable without belief in the resurrection.”<sup>1</sup> Lose the resurrection, and all we affirm about the Creator and good creation begins to unravel.

It is our future vision that most informs living in the present.

Wright elaborates:

From Plato to Hegel and beyond, some of the greatest philosophers declared that what you think about death, and life beyond it, is the key to thinking seriously about everything else—and indeed, that it provides one of the main reasons for thinking seriously about anything at all.<sup>2</sup>

What Christians believe about life after death is not a flying away to a disembodied life elsewhere but resurrected life here. We have a prototype for what this means: the resurrected body of Christ. It is the Resurrected life of Christ which is our image. The Resurrected One is the first fruit of the glorious future to come. He is the anticipated marriage of heaven and earth; the Easter colors we paint with as we image our new world.<sup>3</sup> He is the faithful Gardener who will bring about the full harvest of abundant life in the future. We are invited to co-labor in bringing forth this new Creation, building for the kingdom as we imagine a redeemed cosmos. In Christ, we are restored to the Garden and our true vocation of “mastery among” creatures. Schmemmann says that through the waters of our baptism into Christ—our immersion in the life of Christ as Williams calls it— “man is again king of Creation. The world

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<sup>1</sup> McDonough, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, 6.

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Wright’s unpacking of New Testament Resurrection imagery in Chapter 6 “What the World’s Waiting For.” Wright, 93-108.

again is his life, and not his death, for he knows what to do with it. He is restored to the joy and power of true human nature.”<sup>4</sup> As Schmemmann directs us, to be a master of this world is to be a priest of this world in a Christlike way.<sup>5</sup> Here we return to the divine calling of human creatures given in Genesis 1, “mastery among.” Jesus, the agent of Creation, has revealed what mastery looks like in his life of humble submission, gathering community, praying to his Father, withdrawing and resting, kneeling to wash feet, meditating on the birds of the air and seeds of the earth, and giving his life for the life of the world. We, his followers, are called to cultivate this kind of life.

Wright reminds us that faith in this future is far from a fairy tale. “Resurrection has always gone with a strong view of God’s justice and of God as the good creator. Those twin beliefs give rise not to a meek acquiescence to injustice in the world but to a robust determination to oppose it.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we see this in the life and witness of the Early Church. The message that sparked the Early Church’s missionary activity in the world was that God had raised the Crucified Christ. It was this “sure and certain hope” that allowed them to declare that Jesus was Lord instead of Caesar, to care for the poor, to minister to the plague-ridden, and to establish institutions of care. This was often done at the cost of lives. The vision was also that to encounter another human was to encounter Christ himself and that future judgment would be based on how we treated “the least of these.” Absolutely everything about living in the present was informed by the Resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

Wright notes that we can track commitment to justice and social improvement in the present (or its absence) with belief in Resurrection: “English evangelicals gave up believing in the urgent imperative to improve society about the same time they gave up believing robustly in the resurrection and settled for a disembodied heaven instead.”<sup>8</sup> Proper Christology makes us more earthbound. Schmemmann describes this same core conviction when reflecting on the Church’s liturgical practice. “Our entrance into the presence of Christ is an entrance into a fourth dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life. It is not an escape from the world, rather it is an arrival to a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Resurrection brings forth greater engagement here, not withdrawal elsewhere in the mind’s eye.

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<sup>4</sup> Schmemmann, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Schmemmann, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 27.

<sup>7</sup> With enormous gratitude to Dr. Kavin Rowe and his class on the Early Church. For more, see Rowe.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Schmemmann, 35.

### 6.1.1 Imagine Easter

Easter faith calls us to enter more deeply into the reality of the world through imagining the redemption of the world. This will take creative pursuit, engagement with beauty, and seeking justice. It is the realm of art, creativity and imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Frederick Buechner offers us a rich example of such a scriptural imagination:

Everything is gone that ever made Jerusalem, like all cities, torn apart, dangerous, heartbreaking, seamy. You walk the streets in peace now. Small children play unattended in the parks. No stranger goes by whom you can't imagine a fast friend. The city has become what those who loved it always dreamed and what in their dreams it always was. The new Jerusalem. That seems to be the secret of heaven. The new Chicago, Leningrad, Hiroshima, Baghdad. The new bus driver, hot-dog man, seamstress, hairdresser. The new you, me, everybody.

It was always buried there like treasure in all of us—the best we had it in us to become—and there were times you could almost see it. Even the least likely face, asleep, bore traces of it. Even the bombed-out city after nightfall with the public squares in a shambles and moonlight silvering the broken pavement. To speak of heavenly music or a heavenly day isn't always to gush but sometimes to catch a glimpse of something.<sup>11</sup>

Our work is to imagine Easter for the cosmos. This is the “third stage” of the wisdom pattern—also called Resurrection/Reorder/Second Naivete/Redemption/Reorientation—that gives us hope in our living through suffering. This is how we do not fall into despair in the second stage—Crucifixion/Disorder/Complexity/Fall/Deconstruction. It is because we have a story of everything that “God raised the crucified Christ.” We know that God is able to breathe new life into dust and death.

We catch glimpses of the hopeful future vision Buechner alludes to, foretastes of the coming resurrected life. But we do not look to another far-off world for imagining; it is not “up and away” that we need to look for the vision, but as Wirzba often reminds us “down and here.” Our imaginings are never escapism, but deeply rooted in this earth and the transformation of all things through Christ.

And neither is this a vision that is only limited to humanity, but to all the cosmos.

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<sup>10</sup> Wright teases out missional commitment of the Church in matters of beauty and justice in Chapter 13 of his book, “Building for the Kingdom.” Wright, 207-32. Richard Hays has done profound work in describing the necessity of a scriptural imagination in the life of faith. I am grateful for his interview with our DMIN cohort in 2020 where he discussed cultivating a scriptural imagination.

<sup>11</sup> See “heaven” in Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: a Theological Ape* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

Wright proclaims:

For the last two hundred years Western thought has overemphasized the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God's creation...we treat the hope of creation as mere embroidery around the edges. The biblical vision of the future world is a vision of the present cosmos renewed from top to bottom by the God who is both creator and redeemer... The central Christian affirmation is that what the creator has done in Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the whole world...the entire cosmos with all of its history.<sup>12</sup>

This good future will be a gift of grace “from elsewhere,” not the working of progress or the upward mobility of humankind. We work for the kingdom but never bring forth the kingdom. It is—as all created life is—a gracious gift from the Redeeming Creator.

A faithful Christian vision for the future must be “down to earth.” When I say “down to earth,” I mean having a proper sense of humility that we the Church will not be the Saviors of the World. But also humble in the sense of willing to get our hands in the soil and work for the fruit of the kingdom. Being “down to earth” also means, in the words of Wright, more bodily, more real, than our current reality. Scripture reveals a future hope that has never been heavens far away, but heaven coming down to Earth (Revelation 21). The first fruit of the Resurrected body of Christ is what fuels our imagination for all the created order.

At its core, Christian vision is daring to image a world fully redeemed by Christ. It is believing that everything God is about is for the transformation of the world. We see this most clearly in the sacraments of the Church, when the Holy Spirit transforms not only bread and wine into the body of Christ but transforms people into the body of Christ *for the sake of the world*. It is to recognize that above all, those baptized into Christ are Easter people looking forward to the resurrection of the dead *as we engage in the work of the kingdom*. It is to live the words of the hymn “every day to us is Easter with its Resurrection song.”

The Resurrection is our “sure and certain hope.” Resurrection is *the* central, foundational belief of Christianity. Rowe implores us that Resurrection must be the central component of Christian theological understanding:

Let it be clearly said: without the resurrection, there would have never been anything called Christianity. No resurrection, no Christianity. For early Christians, the resurrection is the central truth about which other matters turn. Indeed, for them it is nothing less than the way God himself is identified: God is the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Take away the resurrection, they thought, and God disappears too...Jesus' resurrection showed the future, what God intended for humanity, and the future was now present, here, and creating a new world. ‘New creation’ became the

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, 80-2, 91.

name for what happened in Jesus' resurrection...God's final word about all there is in not death but life.<sup>13</sup>

Belief in the life to come because of Resurrection is everything... our sure and certain hope, our fuel, our peace. And we need not dwell on it too much.

## ***6.2 Belief in life before death***

What do I mean by that? What I don't mean by not dwelling too much on the future Resurrection is not "*it's a nice thought but doesn't have much to do with the living today.*" Turns out it has everything to do with the living today, because it is here, not elsewhere, that is our now and forever home. I also don't mean "*as long as you believe in something*" or "*we can't really sort this out and just need to have faith.*" As this thesis has tried to argue, confusion and misapplication of Scripture among Christians about final things and life after death has contributed to desecration of God's beloved world. Confusion about evacuation to a heaven elsewhere has produced a *laissez-fair* Christianity. And the New Testament witness is very clear that the substance of our faith is God raising the Crucified Christ. It is not that we have nothing to stand on. We stand on the resurrection.

What I do mean by not dwelling on the future Resurrection is that Christianity at its healthiest and most faithful, has been an active and engaged Christianity. It is to embrace suffering and the cross for the sake of the world in the present because of confidence that God will take care of our future. In other words, we are freed to "give our lives, even to the point of death, because we trust that God will raise us like Christ. This kind of faith leads to courageous, humble, sacrificial living *in the present.*

Christians are those who are not preoccupied with a future heavenly life because the message of Jesus is that the kingdom of heaven has broken in and the assurance that God will faithfully "see to" the future in the pattern of the Resurrection of Christ. In the meantime, we believe in what many have called "life before death." It is here among us, and now we are called to work for the kingdom. In other words, salvation and eternal life and heaven have broken in in the life of Jesus the Christ. The kingdom is "at hand." The waiting we engage in for resurrected life is not passive but active, expectant, and joyful. We are people who sing while we work.

Martin Luther is widely attributed for saying "If the world were to go to pieces tomorrow, I would plant my apple tree today." There is a means of hopeful engagement *for the long term* in the living today.

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<sup>13</sup> Rowe, 12,20,25.

### 6.2.1 In the meantime: Garden, Cook, and examine expectations

What I would like to propose for the conclusion of this book are three simple tasks for the building of the kingdom “in the meantime”: gardening, cooking, and curbing our expectations/embracing limits. These are simple not in a reductive way, for there are worlds of complexity in each one. They are difficult because they are simple. They prove to be the vocations of a lifetime. They are simple as well as radical, because undergirding each task is a set of values counter-cultural to many Western values. They are also “radical” in the origin of the word, *radix*, or root, that they return us to our original vocation as gardeners and the story of Genesis and the good creation, the root of not only this book but the entire Christian narrative.

There is nothing novel about gardening, cooking and limits. In fact, they are often repeated by ecological prophets among us such as Wendell Berry, Rowan Williams, and Norman Wirzba. As another wise voice of ecology, Ellen Davis, urges, “Anything in our world now that slows us down is to be valued and maybe is a gift and even a calling from God.”<sup>14</sup> Richard Foster said in the 1970s that the devil’s tool in our time are much many, noise and hurry. Perhaps little, less, silence, and slowing down are God’s tools in our time as well.

I chose three because of the importance of this number in our tradition. Pragmatically, I also limit this to three because offering more or a list usually leads to forgetfulness and overwhelm followed by non-engagement. Trying to fix everything in a matter as big as the crisis of our planet turns into fixing nothing. Perhaps the greatest challenge in response to the ecological crisis is a feeling of flooding that it is “too big a problem” and that “little things” don’t matter. This often results in futility and despair. How could our little tomato plant, or the yellow curry we’re stewing, or us changing our expectations about home ownership and being a millionaire really help or even address worldwide carbon emissions or polar bear survival? Shouldn’t we be lobbying, addressing broader systemic sin? Shouldn’t the scope of the problem lead us to such radical steps as not using commercial airlines, or driving cars?

The answer is, yes, and no. This type of systemic engagement is crucial. We should be inspired and continually challenged by the lives of those who are taking sacrificial and bold steps in response to ecological crisis, particularly the life and prophetic calling of such young people as Greta Thunberg. But we will not get there if we haven’t tended relationship and connection. I am mindful of the title of one of Wendell Berry’s greatest essays, “It All turns on affection.” If there were a centerline through this work, it is a story of love between parent and child, who you feed and what feeds you, creator and creation. And beauty, wonder, and joy of relationship are not a mere by-product of ecological responsibility, but what “it all turns on.” There is a love story that needs tending. Because it turns out that we care about what we love.

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, interview.



Acts of love are the only thing that has ever “saved” the world. Love of the world is the impetus, for God and us. This is the inspiration, the juice that keeps us active. This is not love in a sentimental view, but love which becomes involved and committed. The marriage of contemplation and action is not only biblical faith, but faithful ecological living.

A note of encouragement as we begin to explore these: there is not a “too small” way to start. Jesus consistently taught to despise not the little things. If you live in an apartment or urban area, grow some basil for your windowsill or find a community garden. If you insist you are “not a cook” try glazing some carrots as a side dish. A good way to begin practicing the third discipline, weeding out expectations is not expecting that you yourself will save the world by attempting something too large. We are all God-breathed dust, after all. Humility is the name of the game. So is awe.

Will it be enough? As Wendell Berry said in an interview with Bill Moyers when posed with this same question, “We can’t ask if it’s enough, we can only do the right thing today.” Here are three of these right ecological things:

#### **6.2.1.1 Garden**

As we contemplate Jesus’ image of a seed for resurrected life, it takes us to the context of soil. Soil is the medium for all transformation. Only soil can transform a banana peel, coffee grounds, and indeed our very bodies, into bread to feed the world. This is the ground of transformation. To say it theologically, we see the “patient” nature of Christ and the hope of Resurrection and the transformation of all things in the miracle of the soil.<sup>15</sup>

The name of one of my college books was “Dirt is a four-letter word.” In this title, one can hear the sense of reverence for what is sacredly called soil as opposed to scorn for what is on the bottom of your shoe. Soil is our origin and our destiny. It is where we all come from and where we will return. It is the ground of being.

There is no better way to connect with the ecology of a place than to get your hands into the soil. Touch it, smell it, consider the color. What can grow in it? What will you add? What will you take away? It will contain the narrative of a place. It will lead to a granular understanding.

Wendell Berry speaks of one thing leading to another when we garden. Every story of gardening in a particular place is a story of needing to develop intimacy. I have tried to force

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<sup>15</sup> See Berry:

The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising and of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or tunnel by which its past enters into its future.

(*Long-Legged House*, 204).” As quoted in Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” 268.

things to grow in places they shouldn't such as tulips in Central Texas and St. Augustine grass in the Panhandle. The first matter of gardening is observation: what grows well and naturally here? This leads to matters of climate, what is the average annual rainfall, what temperature zone do we live in, what is the nature of the soil—its pH, nutrient content, and composition of sand, silt and clay? When is the first freeze historically? When have we passed the danger of frost in the Spring? What are the watering needs of this plant? What are possible pests and diseases? What are natural pollinators that this plant might attract? We enter into existing stories when we garden. And stories are ecological.

### **6.2.1.2 Cook**

Gardening rightfully leads the way to cooking. For what you garden, whether a tomato or some basil or even a vase full of zinnias, will hopefully end up on your table. What we grow we naturally want to share. When we cook, we naturally want to share. Feeding another is an act of love. Tables bring people together. No wonder there is a table in the front and center of most of our sanctuaries. Taking, blessing, blessing and eating is the mystery of our faith.

I hope you have had the pleasure of watching a Julia Child cooking show. I lead you in this way not so you can pick up some better technical knowledge of French cooking (though Julia's goal was to demystify French cooking that all might experience the joy of both the eating and preparing of good food) but to experience Julia. Julia was full of humanity. Cooking fish in a butter sauce was a sensual experience for her. Sharing was the utmost delight. There was a joy that can only be expressed as love. The title of Julia's magnum opus "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." was the fruit of years of cooking alongside others and sharing meals with friends. In the title alone, we can hear words from Genesis we have explored at length "mastery." We also hear the word art. In the 1950s world of Spam®, canned soup, and other highly processed foods, the book was unique in teaching French technique and using fresh foods. Julia believed everyone could return to the simplicity of cooking an omelet in butter for someone they loved. This is not a calling towards expensive ingredients or becoming a gourmet chef, it is to joy, sensuality, goodness, laughter, and relationship through food. Julia embodied this, having tasted that it was a good creation and wanting to share the goodness of both the food and the creating.

Cook something, and share.

### **6.2.1.3 Weed expectations, cultivate limits**

This third one is the messiest, even more so that dirt under the fingernails or a kitchen sink full of dishes. It is hard because it deals with the interior life and the stories we tell ourselves. Weeding out excess expectation will require examination of our thought patterns, particularly which narrative we are living in. Is it a narrative where we are consumers? Is it a narrative of winners or users? What and where are other people and creatures in the story? Are they merely

instruments, or icons? It also requires us to be on-guard about idolatry and blatantly honest about our sin tendencies. We all want to worship things as if they are God. We all are tempted to play God, and sometimes do. And in a Western context, we easily fall into the story that we “make” our own lives, shape our own destinies, and that life is something we earn instead of a gracious gift.

The opposite of expectations is of course, limitations. It is the cultivation of deeper values of allowing, accepting, humility, and failure. These are not high priorities on the “how to succeed” check list. They do not fit into the many narratives of making the best better, the sky is the limit, upward and onward.

The hard inner work—the spiritual discipline really—of weeding our expectations and cultivating limits will naturally lead us a proper perspective of our human lives existing among other creaturely life and places. Or to say it differently, it helps us to think ecologically about relationship and connection, rather than individually. We see iconically rather than instrumentally.

This is all about “what story” we are living inside. As we affirmed, the Christian story of everything is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The pattern of life/death/resurrection describes not only our Scriptural narratives, but reality itself. We are always living out Creation-Uncreation-New Creation, Goodness-Fall-Redemption, Order-Disorder-Reorder.

But there are many rival narratives. There is the story of the autonomous individual, that we are each making our own lives and meaning. There is the story that we can become superheroes and transcend limits. And there is the story which elevates freedom and rights above all. None of these rival narratives have much use for curbing expectations and setting limits.

So, a key question in our examination of our own expectations and limits becomes “Which story is this? Is it the story of a God who raised the crucified Jesus? A story of the kind of power that Jesus revealed in embracing limits and human vulnerability?”

Ruth Haley Barton provides a helpful rule of thumb in the hard work of discerning stories...living into the will of God, another way of expressing the story of God, is always for the care of the world Jesus loves. This is a profoundly ecological question. Where is the world in the story I am living?

### ***6.3 Final thoughts: Crossing over to heaven***

For that is what we can never leave behind, the world. It is this world that God created and called good, this world God so loved that he sent the Son, this world which the kingdom of heaven has invaded.

When we taste and see this world, a new reality breaks in. We are called to know, as Berry says, “intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection.”<sup>16</sup> Then crossing over to heaven is “not as hard as you might think.”

### **Eden Rock**

They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Edon Rock  
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit  
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack  
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.  
My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress  
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,  
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.  
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.  
She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight  
From an old H.P. Sauce bottle, a screw  
Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out  
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.  
The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.  
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way  
Over the drifted stream. My father spins  
A stone along the water. Leisurely,  
They beckon to me from the other bank.  
I hear them call, ‘See where the stream-path is!  
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.’  
I had not thought that it would be like this.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 137-8.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Causley, *Collected Poems 1951-2000* (London: Picador, 2000).

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