



Texts in Context

Preaching Creation: Genesis 1–2

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The creation accounts in Gen 1–2 are referenced five times in the Revised Common Lectionary.¹ These creation texts appear over the course of three years in the seasons of Christmas (St. John Apostle, 1:1–5), Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord, 1:1–5), Lent (First Sunday; 2:15–17; 3:1–7), Trinity Sunday (1:1–2:4a), and Pentecost (Proper 22; 2:18–24). When combined with other creational passages (for example, Gen 9:8–17; Deut 8:7–18; Job 38:1–11; Joel 2:21–27), including new-creation texts (for example, Isa 25:6–9; 35:1–10; Ezek 37:1–14), the lectionary provides regular preaching opportunities with respect to the theme of creation.

But, even with such lectionary provisions, how often does such creation preaching actually take place? Why or why not? And how might the preacher's answer to these questions affect the way in which congregations think and act with respect to matters of the environment and other creational issues?

Creation has been a marginalized theme in the life of the church and its theological reflections for a long time. This has occurred for various reasons, from the influence of a pervasive anthropocentrism to a neglect of Old Testament re-

¹Seven times, if the annual text for December 27, St. John Apostle, is counted.

The lectionary provides the preacher several opportunities to address issues related to creation from the pulpit, and the times suggest a clear need for this. The biblical resources are many—and what the Bible actually says about Creator and creation may surprise both preacher and congregation.

sources.² Only in the last generation or so have significant efforts been made to recover this theme in preaching and teaching. This salutary development is due, in large part, not to the church or to the theological disciplines, but to the emergence of an environmental consciousness in society more generally. It is ironic that the impetus for the church's concern for matters creational has come largely from secular sources. That in itself is a considerable witness to the importance of creation theology: God the Creator is pervasively at work in the larger culture, often independent of the church, and that divine activity has had good effects.

At the same time, it may be said that the last generation or so has seen the advance of significant biblical-theological studies in this area that have enabled creation to assume a more prominent and rightful place in church and academy. Yet, for all the good in this development, the church has not grounded its concern for creation as appropriately as it might. In its conversations and formulations about matters environmental, God and Bible seem often to be bystanders in a conversation dominated by other language, for example, that of stewardship (see below for further discussion). I was recently shown the "environmental statement" of a large congregation that mentioned neither God nor the Bible; in many other instances, God and Bible may be mentioned, but the primary grounding for such statements all too often misses a key point: God's special relationship with nonhuman creatures.³

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I have stated some of the basic claims regarding such a God-creation relationship in these terms: "God is the God of the entire cosmos; God has to do with every creature, and every creature has to do with God, whether they recognize it or not. God's work in the world must be viewed in and through a *universal frame of reference*. That the Bible begins with Genesis, not Exodus, with creation, not redemption, is of immeasurable importance for understanding all that follows."⁴ Such a biblical-theological grounding could be stated even more strongly: God has established a special relationship with each and every creature, a relationship to which the Bible witnesses in numerous texts.⁵ One thinks of the repeated promise that God makes with "every living creature" following the flood (Gen 9:10, 15–17; see 8:1) or the commitment God has made with respect to the salvation of the animals

²For a list of eleven factors that have contributed to this neglect, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) ix–x. See the footnotes of this volume for an extensive bibliography on this subject.

³The word "nonhuman" is unfortunate, defining such creatures by what they are not. But I know of no other term or phrase that designates *all* such creatures. I seek to be sparing in my usage of the term.

⁴Fretheim, *God and World*, xiv.

⁵For details, see Fretheim, *God and World*, especially 249–268.

(for example, Ps 36:6; Isa 11:6–9; 65:25). What does it mean for our environmental considerations that God has made promises to the animals and other creatures?

It is this relationship that God has with every creature that serves as the primary ground for our care for creation. That is to say, if God is so closely related to each creature, we who are created in the image of God must reflect that relationship in all that we do if we are to be and to act appropriately as the image of God in the world. This matter raises at least three key questions regarding the practical and pastoral usage of creation texts:⁶ How will we speak of the Creator? How will we speak of the created? How will we speak about the vocation of human and nonhuman creatures alike?

HOW WILL THE PREACHER SPEAK OF THE CREATOR?

The God of the Genesis creation accounts is not explicitly “defined.” Readers are left to infer the identity of this Creator God from various clues in the text, while drawing on various understandings provided by the larger tradition. In light of such an analysis, readers have often suggested an image of the Creator God that is in absolute control of the developing creation, working independently and unilaterally.⁷ In fact, such an understanding has been the dominant image of the Creator God through the centuries in the religious traditions for which these texts are authoritative. But, is this theological understanding fully appropriate to an explication of the creation passages?

A closer look suggests that such a perspective needs to be modified. From a negative perspective, if this understanding of God in creation is correct, then those created in God’s image could *properly* understand their role regarding the rest of creation in comparable terms—power over, absolute control, and independence. By definition, if nonhuman creatures are understood to be but passive putty in the hands of God, then the natural world becomes available for comparable handling by those who go by the name “image of God.”

From a positive perspective, the creation accounts make available another point of view regarding the Creator God. What if the God of the creation texts is understood to be imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship? Then the way in which the human as image of God exercises dominion is to be shaped by that model. Evidence for this understanding is more widespread in these accounts than is commonly suggested. One might cite, in particular, the way in which these texts speak of the mode in which God chooses to create. Four models may be suggested:⁸ God creates out of already existing materials (for

⁶For purposes of this analysis I read the two accounts of creation in Gen 1–2 as a single whole. In any case, it is likely that the Priestly account of creation (Gen 1:1–2:4a) incorporated the second account (2:4a–25) from the beginning and was never intended to stand alone.

⁷Some formulations of creation by means of “the word” suggest this understanding, as if God’s only means of creating is through speaking or speech-events. For ten, perhaps eleven, modes of creation that are described in the creation accounts, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 34–35.

⁸These items will be developed further in another article.

example, the human being out of the dust of the ground, Gen 2:7); God invites already existent nonhuman creatures to participate in further creating activity (for example, the earth and the waters, 1:11–13, 20, 24); God invites the divine assembly to participate in the creation of the human (“let us,” 1:26–27); God draws the human being into further creative activity (for example, 4:1, where creating language [אָדָם], used again for God in Gen 14:19–22, is used with Eve as the subject).⁹ God’s approach to creating in these examples is communal and relational. In the wake of God’s initiating activity, the Creator God again and again works from within the world in creating, rather than on the world from without—God employing creatures as genuine agents, rather than working independently. Certainly all creatures, including human beings, are deeply dependent upon God for their creation and continuing life. At the same time, these texts show that God has chosen to establish an *interdependent* relationship with them with respect to both originating and continuing creation.¹⁰

God chooses not to retain all power, but to share it with human beings. God thereby chooses not to do everything in the world “all by himself.”

This interdependent divine way with the world may also be observed in the command to the human: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.” This action on God’s part, the first divine words spoken to the newly created human beings, may be considered a power-sharing move. God here chooses not to retain all power, but to share it with human beings: I am giving you specific tasks to accomplish and, by definition, the power with which to carry out those responsibilities. God thereby chooses not to do everything in the world “all by himself.”

The thrust of these texts may be developed in more general terms. The words “relationship” and “community” are basic to this conversation about creation. These are “in” words that are current in discussions regarding creational and environmental issues (and in theological work more generally). All creatures of God together constitute a community in relationship. More particularly, human beings are understood, not as isolated creatures of God, but as part of a global community. Human lives touch the “life” of all other creatures, whether for good or for ill. As Denis Edwards puts it: “Any contemporary theology of the human...will need to situate the human within the community of life. It will need to be a theology of the human-in-relation-to-other-creatures.”¹¹ Everyone and everything are in relationship; reality is relational. All creatures live in a spider web of a world within which

⁹The woman was created out of man (אָדָם) in 2:23; in 4:1, man (אָדָם) is created out of woman.

¹⁰For further discussion of the distinction between originating and continuing creation, and the importance of using creation language for both activities, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 5–9.

¹¹Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 7.

creaturely words and deeds set the web a-shaking, either positively or negatively—especially those perpetrated by human beings. This important relational point has not originated in recent scholarship; it is a strong biblical claim. Indeed, such interrelatedness is so basic to biblical reality that it is understood to be true of God as well as the world of creatures. Both God and world are who they are because of relationships.¹² This manifests itself in the manner in which God engages in creative activity and chooses to relate in an ongoing way to the creatures, both human and nonhuman.

What difference might it make for congregations to hear of God spoken of in such terms? Among other ways of putting the matter, for the preacher to work with this image of the Creator God will have significant implications for further reflection regarding creatures, their interrelationships, and their environmental responsibilities.

HOW WILL THE PREACHER SPEAK OF THE CREATED?

The most basic statement of Gen 1–2 regarding created beings is that they are “good” and “very good.” *Every creature* is evaluated in these terms; the human being is not given a special evaluative word; indeed, human beings are not even given a creation day for themselves as they share the sixth day with the animals. Moreover, this oft repeated evaluation is reported as a direct *divine* evaluation: *God* saw that it was good; God saw that “everything” was good. This evaluation is not reported as an assessment of the narrator, but as God’s own evaluation. What does it mean to be evaluated “good” by God? At the least, it means that God is not done with the creatures once they are brought into being. God experiences what has been created, is affected by what is seen, and passes judgment on the results. This divine way is illumined by the divine evaluation in 2:18, “it is not good that the man should be alone.” Such a divine response assumes that the evaluative dimension of creation entails an ongoing process, within which adjustments, even improvements, can be made in view of the divine response and the engagement of the human (as happens in 2:19–22, with v. 23 constituting an evaluation by the human!). Moreover, such an evaluation by God has environmental implications. To use the language of Francis Watson, “Human acts which treat the nonhuman creation simply as the sphere of use-value or market-value, refusing the acknowledgment of its autonomous goodness, are *acts of terrorism* in direct opposition to the intention of the creator.”¹³

And what does it mean to be evaluated as “good”? The word “good” carries the sense of being correspondent to the divine intention, including elements of beauty, purposefulness, and praiseworthiness. God observes a decisive continuity

¹²For a fuller development of the centrality of relationship in the biblical material, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 13–22.

¹³Francis Watson, *Text, Church, World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 146–147 (emphasis mine).

between God's intention and the creational result. At the same time, good does not mean static or perfect (in the sense of having no need of improvement or development to be what it truly is). Several clues in the text demonstrate that "perfect" is not the appropriate way to assess the creational situation. Certainly the "not good" of 2:18 pushes in this direction, but the command to "subdue" the earth is the clearest evidence for the claim.¹⁴ This verb, used elsewhere in the Old Testament for coercive human activities against other humans (see Num 32:22, 29), is never applied to relationships with creatures that are not human. Moreover, the verb is here used in a pre-sin context and apparently no enemies are in view. I have suggested that the best sense for the verb is "to bring order out of continuing disorder."¹⁵ The command assumes that the earth was not fully developed, that there is not a once-for-all givenness to the creation at the end of the seventh day. God's creation is going somewhere; it is a long-term project, ever in the process of becoming (as the history of nature shows, with the earth-changing activities of such creatures as glaciers, earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis).

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This evaluation of "good" is not taken away when sin enters the life of the world. Sin negatively affects the life of human beings, certainly, and through them the life of other creatures. But nowhere do the Scriptures take away the evaluation "good" from any creature. In fact, many texts in the wake of sin will reinforce that evaluation, even in stronger terms. With respect to human beings: "you are precious in my sight, and honored" (Isa 43:4); God continues to regard them as "crowned...with glory and honor" (Ps 8:5). While we certainly need to hear that we often think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, it is also important for us to hear that we often think of ourselves *less* highly than we ought to think. To speak less highly of the human is to diminish the quality of God's own work. And this is the case not least because of God's own continuing evaluation of them as good. The creational commands indicate that God values us, places confidence in us, and honors what we do and say, though not uncritically. Our words and deeds count; they make a difference to the world and to God, not least because God has chosen to use human agents in getting God's work done in the world. We need constantly to be reminded that the Godness of God cannot be bought at the expense of creaturely diminishment.

¹⁴One might also cite Gen 3:16, which speaks of the "increase" of pain in childbirth, implying that pain would have been experienced in a pre-sin birth. Suffering is thus shown to be not necessarily related to sin, a point also made by the book of Job (see also Jesus' argument in John 9:1-3).

¹⁵See Fretheim, *God and World*, 52-53.

Another word that can be used to designate the created is “free.”¹⁶ One of the ways in which the creation accounts witness to this reality is the seventh day of creation (2:1–3); this day on which *God* rests (not human beings)¹⁷ is testimony to a period of time in which God suspends the divine activity and allows the creatures, each in its own way, to be what they were created to be. God thereby gives to all creatures a certain independence and freedom. With regard to human beings, God leaves room for genuine decisions as they exercise their God-given power (see already Gen 2:19). With regard to nonhuman creatures, God releases them from “tight divine control” and permits them to be themselves as the creatures they are.¹⁸ The latter includes the becoming of creation, from the movement of tectonic plates to volcanic activity, to the spread of viruses, to the procreation of animals. This divine commitment to the creatures entails an ongoing divine constraint and restraint in the exercise of power, a divine commitment that we often wish had not been made, especially when suffering and death are in view. But God will remain true to God’s commitments, come what may.

What difference might it make for creatures to be described by the preacher in these terms? The high value given to the creatures by God needs careful attention in our preaching and teaching, not least in view of the immense impact of shame on the human psyche in our culture. The high value of the nonhuman creatures is also significant for our reflections on the environment and the urgency of our environmental plans and actions.

HOW WILL THE PREACHER SPEAK OF THE VOCATION OF HUMAN AND NONHUMAN CREATURES?

It is not uncommon for discussions about the world’s creatures to be human-centered. This has not changed significantly over the years, even with the concern for the renewed care of creation as dominant as it presently is. All too often these important considerations entail a movement only from the human to the nonhuman, implying a hierarchy of valuation: God, human, nonhuman. Indeed, in some formulations, the nonhuman is almost a “basket case,” as if these creatures did not possess significant capacities both to care for themselves and to be drawn into God’s larger purposes for the creation. It must be stressed that the nonhuman creatures also have a vocational role to play in God’s world and that role often entails a beneficent activity on behalf of the human. Indeed, human beings have been saved from much pain and suffering by the participation of nonhuman creatures in their life, though it has often gone unacknowledged and insufficiently appreci-

¹⁶One might distinguish between the freedom of humans and that of nonhumans with the terms “free will” and “free process.” So John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 46–47.

¹⁷Later texts will call upon human beings to rest as God rested (Exod 20:8–11; 31:17).

¹⁸So Polkinghorne, *Quarks*, 47. Sin, of course, complicates the understanding of freedom, as does the influence of other creatures on our ways of being and doing.

ated.¹⁹ The book of Job, for example, is a remarkable witness to the healing power of the nonhuman world (see especially Job 38–41). We must speak of a mutuality of vocation; the movement goes both ways. Both humans and nonhumans are called by God to a vocation on behalf of the other.

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What is the best possible language we can use for this mutual vocation? The appeals regarding churchly responsibility for matters environmental seem largely to be couched in terms of stewardship, which Paul Santmire and others have shown to be a deeply problematic way of grounding the conversation and articulating the human vocation.²⁰ Another problematic formulation is that of the 1993 ELCA Social Statement: “[O]ur *primary* motivation is the call to be God’s caregivers and to do justice.”²¹ As fine as this concern is, the word “primary” claims too much. The primary grounding for such considerations is not God’s calling to us, but, as we have seen, God’s relationship to these creatures.²² Another formulation, somewhat less problematic, suggests that concerns regarding the environment are grounded in the recognition of the creation as God’s gift to human beings. This “gift” formulation is appropriate in some ways in that it suggests that, say, water, earth, and vegetation have a vocation, too. At the same time, the word “gift” can be problematic in that it can be understood simply as that which is given to us for human enjoyment or human life. But, creatures such as water, earth, and vegetation are gifts for *all* creatures, without which life would not be possible for any of them. Indeed, water, earth, and vegetation are more fundamental to life than human beings are. Such a recognition of the foundational role that such creatures play needs always to be remembered when speaking about the special role given to humans in creation. We should state as clearly as possible the nature of God’s own relationship to water and vegetation, a relationship that is prior to any creaturely relationship. And so we seek, most basically, to care for

¹⁹For a preliminary listing of such activities on the part of nonhuman creatures that benefit the human, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 278–284.

²⁰For a thorough and careful study of these issues, see the various writings of Paul Santmire. With respect to the problematic issue of stewardship, see his “Partnership with Nature according to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 32/4 (2003) 381–412. For an initial assessment, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 273–275.

²¹From *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, ELCA Social Statement, 1993, p. 8 (emphasis mine). Available at www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Environment.aspx (accessed 17 November 2008).

²²The ELCA statement moves close to this way of putting the matter when it states: “Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth” (p. 2). The divine “care for the earth” may be too narrow an understanding, however; God’s care is one dimension of a more comprehensive relationship.

such creatures *for God's sake* and not simply for our own sake or for that of other creatures.

It would be good if we gave the language of stewardship a rest for a period of time and used instead other language, for example, that of partnership and/or servanthood.²³ In any case, it is time to be more deliberate about the responsibility of preaching creation, for the sake of both world and God. In view of the presence of creation texts in the lectionary on a regular basis, and the neverending concerns about the environment, almost any season of the year would be an appropriate time to address one or more of these issues. ⊕

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²³For partnership, see Santmire, "Partnership with Nature." For the language of servanthood, see the study of Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001). For my assessment of these language possibilities, see *God and World*, 273–276.