
AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD

A sermon by Ross Langmead

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Gen 1:1-24

A while ago Alison and I went for a walk at Badger Weir, near Healesville. The air is so different from the air at Spotswood. There were huge Mountain Ash trees standing straight right up to the sky. There were other varieties of eucalyptus trees and tree ferns. There were rosellas, king cockatoos and kookaburras. There was the rich, dripping wetness of rainforest. My soul was refreshed and I felt at home. Do you ever get this feeling, whether it's on a long beach, or in the bush, or even in a local park?

For some of us our favourite place is a jungle or hillside in Burma. For others it is the Ocean Road or the Grampians or Wilsons Prom. Why do we have such a special connection to some places? Why does this happen so often to so many of us, this deep down link with creation? And what connection is there between Christian faith and the creation around us? I'd like to explore this question of what part the environment plays in Christian faith and practice, at least what part it could play if we opened ourselves to it more.

I'm going to take my basic clue today from the Genesis 1 passage we heard read to us. This is a carefully constructed poem or song containing the Hebrew understanding of creation, and there is one phrase which occurs six times, in verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21 and 25, at the end of each day of creation. What is it? "And God saw that it was good." The one thing that is hammered home repeatedly in this poetic portrayal of creation is that at every stage of God's creative activity, God saw that it was *good*. In God's eyes this material world has infinite value. The final time, in verse 31, it goes up a notch: "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was *very good*."

The basic clue is that the story of the universe begins with unspeakable goodness, inexpressible love and exquisite creativity. In the beginning was the creative God, the source and the spring of this cosmos. Long before there was original sin there was original blessing. Christian theology since St Augustine in the fifth century has concentrated on the alienation between humanity and God, on the need for

redemption being the very centre and substance of the Good News. But is original sin the beginning of the story? No.

The slow development of the universe and the earth has taken far longer than to the relatively recent development of humans. If we were somehow to compress the total history of the universe into a single year, we human beings would not appear until 11 pm on the last day of the year. Relatively speaking, we've only been here an hour! And most of earth's environmental damage has happened since the Industrial Revolution, which has occurred only in the last half-second of the year of the universe. We are such "Johnny-come-latelies" and yet we are so cocky that we are the centre of creation. Such late arrivals and yet we have caused such environmental destruction, threatening to destroy our very own habitat.

Genesis 1 reminds us that the beginning of the story is one of overflowing beauty and goodness, and that God is behind it all. Christian faith, along with Jewish faith, affirms a good God who is self-expressed in creation. God, we believe, is more than creation and is not to be worshipped in creation. But the beauty, diversity, extravagance and sheer grace of God can be discovered in creation.

This basic clue, with a few other biblical and theological strands, leads me firmly to a **creation spirituality**, a way of being as a Christian that lives in gratitude for the way God takes shape in creation, in other human beings, and most clearly in the life of Jesus Christ. To live like this is to live in overflow mode. To live like this is to sense that God is within as well as beyond. To live like this is to look for signs of God's presence in all of daily life and not just in the religious spaces. It is to live in a charged universe. To quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, "there is a freshness deep down things".

I mentioned Healesville before. My father's parents were brought up in Healesville, and they all loved that area. Dad was his most relaxed self when taking us to Toolangi and Badger Weir as kids. I remember him pointing out the old bush block which his family once owned near Healesville. He and Mum spent their honeymoon on the bush block in a tent in May, with frosty mornings and the sounds of the bush birds. I'm not sure Mum was really keen, but Dad was! He loved camping and breathing the fresh air of a beach in winter.

And yet in his sermons I don't remember ever hearing any reference to this expansive sense of being at home in the bush. He was a Salvation Army officer, a

missionary to Hong Kong and to Taiwan. He was strict and puritanical, a sincere and committed fundamentalist Christian. He stuck to the basics of the Gospel as he saw them: God made us to live in relationship with God but we have sinned. Jesus came to die for us and we need to turn to Jesus to restore our vertical relationship with God, and then concentrate single-mindedly on those who are headed for hell because they either haven't heard of Jesus or have rejected him.

We could call this a **redemption spirituality**, making the need for human redemption the centre of the universe story. Sin, rather than blessing, is at the centre. The tragedy is that although my father intuitively loved the bush, the sound of the kookaburra and the magpie and the smell of dew on gum leaves, his theology didn't give a framework in which to express it or integrate it into his Christian faith or practice. It's true that when we praised God in worship, we included thanks for the many beauties of creation, and we magnified God's name for God's greatness in giving us all these gifts. But that's where it stopped. And the material world then took a distant second place as we set about solving the spiritual problems of the world.

In this redemption spirituality creation always takes a back seat. This way of seeing Christian faith has several dangers, if we're not careful.

The first danger is that it will be **limited to saving humans**. It may be limited to a personal, spiritual relationship with God rather than a vision of a new kingdom of God that includes this personal relationship but affects all dimensions of reality. Genesis 1 reminds us that at all stages of creation God enjoyed what was made and saw that it was good. The dirt and the water, the animals and the plants, the whole extravagant canvas of physical reality, is the self-expression of God, and God calls it good. The Gospel is not just news about humans.

The second danger of redemption spirituality is that it may **over-emphasise God's distance from creation**. We often speak of God as separate from creation, upholding it a bit like the Greek god Atlas with the globe on his shoulders. Yet, as Paul reminds us in Acts 17, God is not far from any of us. In God we live and move and have our being (17:28). God is like the air we breathe. God in Jesus is present in the poor we serve and stand with. God is the still small voice within. In creation spirituality we see God as both within and beyond, in and through all things and yet also greater than the sum of all things, almost like the soul of the universe, guiding it and yet intimately connected to it. This is a sacramental understanding of

the world. That is, ordinary things can bear the presence of God to us. We already understand that bread and wine can be Christ to us—as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper today we sense that in these ordinary things we find God’s presence. So also a sunset can be God’s prompting for praise, and a soothing dark night can contain an enveloping sense of God’s comfort or peace. God is not distant from creation.

The third danger of redemption spirituality is that it may **focus on Jesus the atoning Saviour at the expense of the cosmic Christ**. This might sound a bit theological, but what I am saying is Jesus Christ is not only the person who died for our sin but also the Word of God taking shape as a person. The Word of God, as we see in John 1, Hebrews 1, Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1, holds together all things in the universe and is the creative principle within God. The reconciling of humans with God can only be complete when all things are reconciled to God. As Romans 8 says, the whole creation groans in expectation and hope for the reconciliation of all dimensions of reality under God. There are various ways of understanding this passage, but the central meaning is that we are bound up in this together, humans and the rest of creation. And why? Because the redeeming saviour Jesus is one and the same as the cosmic divine Word, active from the beginning in creating the universe and working towards the harmony of all things under God. Redemption spirituality works with too small a canvas by seeing atonement as merely a human reality. The kingdom of God is bigger than us.

The fourth danger of redemption spirituality is that **its hopes for the future tend to be otherworldly**. I used to sing the words, “This world is not my home. I’m just a-passing through”. My father saw the world as the realm of the devil. It was getting worse, not better. He waited for God to intervene dramatically and save us from future calamities and catastrophes. There’s no point in planting trees if God’s going to destroy the earth, maybe tomorrow. If our view of the end times or Jesus’ return makes us accepting of environmental destruction, there is something unbalanced about our view of God’s ultimate reign. However we view God’s coming in fullness, the biblical vision is clear that it will involve a renewed earth in which justice will reign and harmony, even between living things, will be the rule. A creation spirituality is rooted solidly in this world, created by God and declared good, even if we hope for eternal life in God as well.

I’ve mentioned four reasons my father’s faith found it difficult to find a place for creation. Humans were at the centre. God was distant from creation. Jesus was

associated with personal atonement rather than cosmic reconciliation. And the future focus was otherworldly.

What might it mean for Christian disciples to dig into the Bible again and reverse these emphases? What if we remind ourselves that while humans are very important we are only a small part of this fantastic universe? What if we recover a lively sense of God within us and reflected in the world around us? What if our understanding of God's mission is expanded to include not only human salvation but the transformation of all dimensions of reality? And what if we committed ourselves to living out the reality of heaven right here on earth, as a sign of God's coming kingdom?

It would mean new ways of **being, worshipping and acting**.

I've already hinted at the new ways of **being**. We can learn from the great Christian mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Francis of Assisi, who in different ways lived aware of God's lush green creativity or God's gentle care for creatures. We can learn from modern environmentalists, who so often have a close affinity to nature and a respect for trees or a high value for endangered species. We can learn from the fast growing Christian literature on faith and the environment. In particular, we probably need to learn to stop more often and withdraw from the extreme activism that we are so often caught up in. The new way of being is living in gratitude. The new way of being is letting the love of God soak down to our depths until it saturates our soul and helps us to see the world with different eyes. I have written a song that says, "Seeing the world with different eyes, And finding that God is deep within, we're going deeper, Oh surprise, different eyes. Things that grow seem greener now." This new way of being can be called sacramentalism, letting creation bring God's presence to us, or be transparent to the divine behind and within it. I don't find it hard, even in the city, to enjoy parks and creeks and clouds. I don't exclude human-made wonders when I wonder at creation either. I marvel at buildings, at bicycles and at dams. The central thing is being fully present in God's creation and responding to its grace and wonder.

There are new ways of **worshipping**, which we've begun to explore to some extent here. We can bring creation into our services with the symbols we use, or take our worship out into the outdoors. We can develop our creation praise, and we can pray for the environment. We can recognise the change of seasons on the first Sunday of Spring, Summer, Autumn or Winter. Did you notice that today is the

first Sunday of Winter? We can also integrate environmental concern with other concerns as part of our understanding of mission. We can bring the variety of daily life into worship, along with justice, community, children, suffering and local affairs, bringing them all to God.

If we practise a new way of being and a new way of worshipping, the new ways of **acting** are likely to flow fairly naturally. I don't need to list for you the ways we Christians can be committed to environmental action. Let me say, however, that I find practising what I preach quite a challenge. It's hard not to let convenience take priority over environmental care, or go for the cheaper factory eggs rather than the more expensive free range eggs. It takes effort to find out which face tissues come from wood chipping native forests. Living simply is complicated. That's why, for me, Christian community is an essential ingredient in this new way of acting, in order to help me grow in understanding, grow in my practice and stick with it in the long haul.

The American evangelical writer Tony Campolo has written a book called, *How to rescue the earth without worshipping nature: A Christian's call to save creation*. What I have been talking about has been less about rescuing the earth or saving creation, as if we could do that, and more about gently broadening our horizons to realise that God created the universe and saw that it was good. This is the basic clue to a new way of **being**, living in gratitude and a sense of God's closeness to us in the physical world. It is also the basic clue for us in **worshipping**, realising that we respond to a self-expressing and creative God. It is also the basic motivation for a new way of **acting**, working for a transformed relationship between ourselves and God, ourselves and each other, and ourselves and the rest of creation.