

RE-BIRTH OF THE EARTH^{*}

NATURAL WILD FREE

John E. Swanson

INTRODUCTION

One day a friend gave me a flier for a book on wildlife that began, "This book is dedicated to all who find Nature not an adversary to conquer and destroy, but a storehouse of infinite knowledge and experience linking man to all things past and present. They know conserving the natural environment is essential to our future well-being."

As I look around for various types of reading materials on the subject of our care of the earth, it appears that the shelves are full of productions by writers who remind the public that we live in a consumer oriented society that has perceived the environment as something with which to compete and over which to master rather than that with which to live. However, our world view is changing slowly from "using" the land to "loving" the land. It is a return to the spirit of the Native American understanding of the environment. It is an ecological perception that is replacing a consumer perspective.

Are these hopeful words? Yes, but they are said at a time when humans can determine the future of the earth in a way that is as serious now as ever. The delicate balance of life and death in the atmosphere through the ozone, the destruction of watersheds, the contamination of our water, and the overflow of waste reminds us that we hold the fate of the earth in our hands.

Another characteristic of our times is the vocal expressions by some religious groups. Their Biblical view of creation has challenged the thinking and teaching of scientific hypotheses in the public schools to such an extent that most schools have stopped teaching creation theory altogether. In many cases that means that youth are no longer being encouraged to think about creation at all.

We are also becoming sensitized to a world that is not only the northern hemisphere composed of North America and Europe. There are countries of all sizes and shapes and populations. We refer particularly to the Third World. Are they primitive? Many of these countries

^{*} The significance of the "Re-" in the title is two-fold. First, "Re-Birth of the Earth" is based on a resource used several years ago at LOMC titled "Birth of the Earth." Secondly, "re-" emphasizes the continuous nature of God's creative activity in the world.

have industries and technologies much like anyone else. But they also have poverty unlike what we know in the United States.

We are beginning to realize that there are exploited lands and people, and resources have been used to benefit only a small portion of the world's population.

In part this is what is happening today:

1. An emerging ecological perception of the environment
2. The threat of destruction from pollution and waste
3. The shift from Newtonian to Nuclear physics
4. The challenge to and from the conservative religious community
5. The relationship with the Third World

It is within these givens and our responses to them that this resource is prepared. It is intended to help people address the issues that each of these items raises. It takes the form of a new vision of God's creative process.

It is my opinion that one treats the environment in the way one perceives creation as an activity and as an order. We can conduct the religious/scientific debates. We can look for proof of our positions. We can play the intellectual games and talk about what we believe (belief defined as intellectual assent). Be we creationist or evolutionist or hold to another the point of view, we have filters, and these filters interpret our perceptions.

As one naturalist puts it, "Theory determines what we see." Even the scientific/intellectual community has a problem with perception and filters.

The responsibility of the Church's educational ministry is not to prove which doctrine is right and true, but to give the learners handles, concepts, images, and faith systems to act as responsible agents of God in this world. We need to see creation as the work of God. We need to know who God is in this creative work. We must grapple with human responsibility and irresponsibility. We must be inspired to take the God-given risks of God's people in God's world to maintain it.

In new ways we must stir our imaginations and allow them to respond to the contemporary issues.

A way to accomplish this task is to give people a wholistic vision, a way to look at and talk about this reality that gives some concrete, interpretive tools. I will use the word "metaphor" for this.

A metaphor has limitations like any sermon illustration. It is not a model. It has mythic qualities to it. A metaphor puts meaning together in an understandable, earthly construct. It helps us to interpret our life experiences and gives a way to talk about and celebrate our understandings. Also the metaphor we use will help shape

the way we respond to our understanding; our practices. It may be more emotional than intellectual. But it shapes our perception of reality.

We are familiar with metaphors in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of John where Jesus is described in various ways such as the Living Water, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Vine and the Branches, and so on.

Our use of metaphors in daily language is when we put abstract ideas into some type of concrete figures. "You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip." "They are all washed up." "I am flying higher than a kite."

Let me illustrate the power of the metaphor. There was one put to use several years ago that shaped our thinking, impacted our decisions, judged out actions. It was the "life boat" theory of population and available resources.

There is renewed concern about the carrying capacity of the earth. Population may be our most critical problem. How many people can it support? We look around us and discover that many of the people go to bed hungry each night. Have we the food to feed them? What about other resources? They are being depleted rapidly.

This perception has led to the "life boat" theory. At some point a decision must be made that there can be only so many inhabitants on planet Earth because there is only so much space available and only so much can be produced. Anything that exceeds the given equation puts the human and non-human world in jeopardy.

This metaphor has been at the heart of many who advocate birth control measures. It was just a few decades ago that citizens of the United States were cajoled into "acting responsibly" and reproducing only two children per family. I remember apologizing to people, tongue in cheek, for having four children.

Decisions, directives, ethics - all derived from the metaphor of the earth as a "life boat."

However, along came another metaphor, that of the ark, like in Noah's Ark.

In this instance the earth is a boat that is capable of handling future growth. The animals may have boarded the ark two by two, but do not be deceived that they disembarked that way.

To envision the earth as an ark took away the doomsday notion and introduced hope. We can live with each other and with our resources. What causes hunger in our world today? Politics! Greed! Priorities need to be rearranged.

I use this example of the "life boat" and "ark" metaphors because it is appropriate in the context of this paper as well as within recent experience. It shows how a metaphor affects our perception, determines policy, and sets a standard for judgment.

At the heart of the matter is this: It is not what we see; it is how we see it. The metaphor is a tool we use for looking at life and interpreting it.

H. Richard Niebuhr, an American theologian, helps us understand this. First, there is the action. We perceive it. We then interpret the action. Our response is to the interpretation of the action.

It is this interpretive step, between our observing/experiencing of something and our response that needs to be educated. This is the place of the metaphor.

Thus, the theme this year invites you to look at God, God's creation, human responsibility and irresponsibility, and motivation for action using the metaphor of birth.

THE BIRTH METAPHOR

The birth metaphor is a way to help us look at how God creates. It is derived from several postures. It comes out of the experience of how creation occurs today as well as reflects some of the "Body" language of the Church in which we describe the presence of God in this world.

Before looking at the metaphor we need to look at some of the Biblical reports that have shaped metaphors for the European-American thought process in the past. The concepts from the Bible, whether we accept them or reject them, have played a great role in our understanding of the natural world. They have been the standard by which Western culture has measured the understanding of the natural world. Lynn White, Jr., in an essay entitled "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crises" points this out when he says,

What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny - that is, by religion. To Western eyes this is very evident in, say, India or Ceylon. It is equally true of ourselves and of our medieval ancestors.¹

¹ White, Jr., Lynn, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Environmental Handbook, Edited by Garrett de Bell (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 19.

What has been the shaping religious system for the Western world has its roots in the Genesis account.

White continues later in the essay showing the impact of the religious mind on the scientific mind:

From the thirteenth century onward, up to and including Leibnitz and Newton, every major scientist, in effect, explained his motivations in religious terms. Indeed, if Galileo had not been so expert an amateur theologian he would have got into far less trouble: the professionals resented his intrusion. And Newton seems to have regarded himself more as a theologian than as a scientist.²

There are two important factors that underlie the Genesis accounts of creation. First, there was a given understanding of life in the days of the writers centuries ago that impacted people's perception. There was a "science," maybe very primitive, but it was a science.

Though the Biblical authors were not trying to write a scientific journal, it was the "state of the art" science that they used.

We may want to disagree with this position. However, your attention is called to the fact that the simple world of Newton is gone.

What a scientific world view gives us is a perspective from which we make observations within the limits of our technology. This was true for the Biblical writers in the same way it is true for us today.

Secondly, the authors of the various Biblical stories see beyond the "technical" knowledge of the day to the power of God.

I call your attention to another contemporary comparison. There is a difference of opinion within the religious community as to the role of the theory of evolution. In the opinion of people opposed to the theory of evolution, God is excluded from the theory. Well, so did the ancient scientific views exclude God. Is it possible to see God as the source of evolution? The Old Testament writers would have done so if that were the prevailing opinion of the day. It so happens their "science" included mythology and poetic descriptions of creation to which they added their understanding of God.

Unfortunately, when creation stories become the debatable subject it is often at the expense of the profundities of what the stories say. They are exciting and carry meaning to us of great theological significance.

Look at the first story, Genesis 1:1-2:4. This is usually conceived as "The" Creation Story. This account presents three things that are very sophisticated. First, it claims that God is the author of

² Ibid., 22.

the process. This is a startling claim because the scientists of that day would put down such a radical assertion of a monotheistic God. A single God doing a task attributed to dragons and demons? This flew in the face of the thinking of that day. The author is a radical!

The second point the author makes is a very deep, long-lasting theological statement that threads its way through the Old and New Testaments. He has a dynamic understanding of "Word" - the power, the creative energy of God. This power, the "Word," takes many forms. It is this Word that brings the world into existence. In its development through the centuries recorded in Scripture, we see the role of the prophets (those who speak for God) and the person Jesus (the Word of God incarnate). The Word, the Word proclaimed, the Word made flesh, the Word written and uttered in today's world all bespeak of the God who applies His personal energy and power to create, sustain, and renew life.

The third aspect of the First Creation Story is that it is a liturgical drama. For some the words "liturgy" and "ritual" are dirty words because they smack of doing something for the sake of putting on a sham. The purpose of liturgy is to take the worshiping community through a drama where they fully participate in the activity of God in a capsulated form. It is from this perspective we can read the First Genesis Account. If one is willing to let the poetry take hold one cannot help but sense the movement and the progress of the emerging world. There is no doubt what God is doing. The audience is a part of the drama.

The second creation story, Genesis 2:4-25, has different concerns though it does compliment the first story. Its origin is not the same as the first account. The players are different. It is the story of humanity's place in creation. How did things get their names? How did men and women come to be? What are humanity's responsibilities?

There is a third predominant creation story. Strains of it are found in various historical books in the Old Testament. It is organized in Psalm 104. The Psalmist touches a tremendous cord of intimacy between the creation and the Creator. It is a statement of dependence. God is the source of life. Without Him all things die.

There is a striking parallel between the Psalmist's understanding of God's influence and modern day science's understanding of the source of energy.

Steve Van Matre in Sunship Earth describes the story of life which lifts up different movements in the composition of God's creation.

ENERGY FLOW

Sunlight energy is transferred in decreasing amounts from those growing things which can capture it (plants - food producers) to those which obtain it from the dying of others (certain plants and animals - food

decomposers) . .

CYCLES

As these producers, consumers, and decomposers grow and die, they are using life's essential chemicals or nutrients, taking these nutrients from and returning them to their reservoir in the earth's air, soil, and waters over and over again . . .

COMMUNITY

These essential chemicals or nutrients and the sunlight energy available have varied greatly in both amount and quality in many places and times, permitting a great number of different plants and animals to share the earth . . .

INTERRELATIONSHIPS

In meeting their needs all these plants and animals are constantly interacting with one another and with their surroundings in different ways . . .

CHANGE

Because they are in the process of both acting upon their surroundings and being acted upon, all plants and animals and the places where they live are becoming something else . . .

ADAPTATION

In the overall story of life some plants and animals end up with new and successful ways of solving all the problems brought about by the altering of these conditions where they live . . .³

Sunship Earth is solar powered. The whole system, the global community, is a recipient of energy that in one way or the other comes from the sun. It is through the capability of the communities that this energy flow is managed.

Aldo Leopold, the classic Wisconsin conservationist, understands the ecosystem as a pyramid.

Plants absorb energy from the sun. This energy flows through a circuit called the biota, which may be represented by a pyramid consisting of layers. The bottom layer is the soil. A plant layer rests on the soil, an insect layer on the plants, a bird and rodent layer on the insects, and so on up through various animal groups to the apex layer, which consists of the larger carnivores.

³ Van Matre, Steve, Sunship Earth (Martinsville: American Camping Association, 1979), 15.

The species of a layer are alike not in where they come from, or in what they look like, but rather in what they eat. Each successive layer depends on those below it for food and often for other services, and each in turn furnishes food and services to those above. Proceeding upward, each successive layer decreases in numerical abundance. Thus, for every carnivore there are hundreds of his prey, thousands of their prey, millions of insects, uncountable plants. The pyramid form of the system reflects this numerical progression from apex to base. Man shares an intermediate layer with the bears, raccoons, and squirrels which eat both meat and vegetables.⁴

Land, then is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats, and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life. There is always a net loss by downhill wash, but this is normally small and offset by the decay of rocks. It is deposited in the ocean and, in the course of geological time, raised to form new lands and new pyramids.⁵

In addition to food chains and food webs (i.e. the producer, the consumer, and the decayer), there are other systems which describe interdependence: water cycles and plant and aquatic successions.

God's creation is an ecosystem: The term "eco" is Greek for "home." "Home" is both the immediate environment and the world. "Home" is both an isolated site as well as the universe.

The author of Psalm 104 has this sense of ecosystem, interdependence, and the source of energy.

There are several other creation concepts in the Bible that are overlooked. One is in I Samuel 2:8. It is a brief statement: "For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them he set the world." The author had an architectural understanding of God and space.

Another creation story is in Proverbs 8:22-31. Here the first item created is "wisdom," and wisdom is a woman. (And you thought the first to be created was Adam? Not according to Proverbs.) Wisdom is pictured as standing side by side with God as God puts the creation together. What is wisdom? Sophia? It is God's integrity! This understanding underlies some Pauline thinking.

⁴ Leopold, Aldo, A Sand Country Almanac (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 252.

⁵ Ibid., 253.

And still another vision of creation that is very exciting because to some degree it is one that challenges some of our present day creationists is found in Job 40:15-24. "Behold, Behemoth . . . He is the first of the works of God."

The theme of this passage is that God is in control of all evil forces in spite of appearances to the contrary. One can twist the passage around, as other passages have been jerked and spliced, and make a case for creation on this account.

The one passage that stands alone, but brings into question the need to reflect on all the Biblical stories of creation is Colossians 1:15ff. All things were created through Jesus Christ, according to Paul. Is it not interesting that nowhere in the New Testament is any particular creation story given preferential treatment? The fact is that there are similarities between John 1:1 and the First Genesis Account. And there is a great affinity between the role of Jesus in creation according to Paul in Colossians and the role of wisdom in Proverbs.

The birth metaphor is an attempt to view God's creation from the perspective of Twentieth Century experiences that include a deep and abiding understanding of a God who is very present in the world that God creates.

There are several characteristics to this metaphor. The first is that it takes into account a common view of how the world is continually created today. The word we use for bringing something into being is "birth." It involves a gestation period and includes parents.

Birth is seen as a loving act, the result of love, and the expression of love.

Birth is the way species survive. In most instances in the non-human world, once a being is no longer reproducing, it dies or is killed off. Thus, to sustain the species, survive, and reproduce are the purposes of a created entity.

In many cases the Biblical stories of creation focus most of their attention on the creation of and service to humanity. They tend to be anthropocentric. The entities of the non-human world are seen only in relationship to humans and not as having value in and of themselves.

This has led some people, like Lynn White, Jr. mentioned above, to draw this conclusion:

What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?

While many of the world's mythologies provide stories of creation, Greco-Roman mythology was singularly incoherent in this respect. Like Aristotle, the intellectuals of the ancient West

denied that the visible world had had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve, to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the second century Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the Incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.⁶

In metaphors suggested by Scripture, God is seen as outside of the creation. In the birth metaphor God is personally, intimately involved.

When I read Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed I do some serious reflecting on what it means to me. "I believe that God has created me and all that exists." I take two things into account.

First, God creates me. That assertion means that something more happens than that my parents decided to have a child and my mother bore me in her womb. I could get very descriptive here, but I will let you do your own thinking. There is something about my knowledge of the "process" and my belief in God that brings my parents' actions, the biological process, and the work of God together so that I can say I am given birth by God.

Second, with this understanding I realize that I live in solidarity with all that exists, for as God has given birth to me so God has given birth to them. All creation has this something in common.

Thank you, Luther, for the insight!

⁶ White, op. cit., 20.

One can imagine the universe as the "body of God." From God all things come. In God all things have their being. The logo for this resource is the transformation of a tadpole into frog (a birth, so to speak) sitting on a hand. The hand is the hand of God.

We tend to use "body talk" in the New Testament. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are fed with Christ's body in the Sacrament of the Altar. We understand the resurrection of Jesus as a bodily event. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is embodied in His believers. Being in Christ is called a new or re-birth.

As with any metaphor there are some limitations when thinking of the universe as God's body because it smacks of pantheism. This is a fancy word meaning that God is in all natural things.

To say that the universe is the body of God is not to say that this is all to be said about God. The universe is the expression of God. God is more. Yet, the universe as God's body gives us images of a God of love and intimacy with the world.

Only one place in Scripture does this imagery exist. "You are mindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deuteronomy 32:18). Interestingly enough one of the root words for mercy, i.e. God's mercy, compassion, in the Old Testament is "womb." When God assures Israel of God's love for her, Isaiah puts it (49:15):

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?

This metaphor does not rule out the dynamics of the other images of creation in the Biblical tradition. It is intended to give an added dimension of love and closeness.

This metaphor also relieves us of the academic debate over how the world was originally created. We can focus our energies on how the world is created now. We see the continuity.

Birth involves mystery and miracle. Birth is awesome. Regardless how the process is scientifically described there is the element of the unknown. There is a power in this event that can only be celebrated.

Birth is not to be a complicated image. It should be able to simply and freely give a handle to those who choose to use it.

Birth is not to be an idolatrous doctrine nor an ultimate statement about how God does things. It should play for the young and the uninitiated as well as the old and the sophisticated.

The birth metaphor expresses:

- Love of the Creator for the creation
- Involvement of the Creator in the process of creation
- Ownership of the Creator of the process

Risk taking on the part of the Creator to be exposed to the world
Mystery of the event
The continuous activity of creation, not the once-for-allness of other metaphors
The intimacy of God
The interrelationship of all of God's creation - all things created (given birth) through God
The dependence of all of creation on God

From the physical act of giving birth this metaphor derives its strength.

. . . it joins the reservoir of the great symbols of life and of life's continuity: blood, water, breath, sex, and food. In the acts of conception, gestation, and birth all are involved, and it is therefore no surprise that these symbols became the center of most religions, including Christianity, for they have the power to express the renewal and transformation of life - the 'second birth' - because they are the basis of our 'first birth.'

To summarize: the birth metaphor brings us closest to:

1. the beginnings of life,
2. the nurture of life,
3. the fulfillment of life, and
4. the parental nature of God.

THE SAVING PRESENT PARENT - GOD

What type of God does the birth metaphor espouse?

The nature of God as loving and nurturing has already been made apparent. Does one need to add more?

Throughout Scripture there is one image of God that prevails. It is the image of God's "saving presence."

We use many symbols to describe God: the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, the Mighty Fortress of Psalm 46, Father as used frequently by Jesus, Spirit, King, Almighty. We are being made conscious today of the feminine and maternal descriptions of God in Scripture, too.

There are several ways God the Creator is perceived: the artist, the master geneticist, the watchmaker, the plumber/electrician, the King of Siam, the housekeeper, the contractor, the architect, the earth mover, the one who sets boundaries and limits.

⁷ McFague, Sallie, Models of God (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 105.

However, there is something about God as Parent that is more appealing than some of the other mechanical and aloof views of God.

Sallie McFague contrasts the artist with the parent.

An artist, upon completing a work, makes a judgment whether it is good or bad; the judgment is an aesthetic one based on critical standards. The artist may, of course, decide at a future time that what was good is no longer. But a child, the product of our bodies, is not judged in this way. Certainly children may also be considered good or bad, yet the criteria applied are not aesthetic ones, that is, neutral standards, unrelated to the parent. Rather, it is the quality of the relationship between parent and child that is most important; we judge, then, in categories of love, not art.⁸

James Weldon Johnson says in his dramatic poetic sermon, "Creation:"

This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.⁹

We look at a world in pain and anguish. Where is the mother? She is feeding her young. She does not give up on her children. Like the pelican who cannot find enough food for her young, she will pluck her breast and suck blood from her own body to feed her children until food can be found.

Whatever images are used it is essential that one characteristic of God prevails, and it is this: God is the saving presence in the universe. God brings to fulfillment what God creates.

God is the caring Parent, both Mother and Father.

In this role God is vulnerable. As the parent is often the risk-taker setting free the children to be what they are to be, God takes chances with creation. But nothing causes God to abandon God's children.

One such story of a faithful God is the Parable of the Loving Father (sometimes known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but maybe more properly the Parable of the Elder Brother).

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Johnson, James Weldon, God's Trombones (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 20.

Paul says in Romans 8 there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

Sallie McFague writes about it this way:

Parental love is the most powerful and intimate experience we have of giving love whose return is not calculated (though a return is appreciated): it is the gift of life as such to others. Parental love wills life and when it comes, exclaims, "It is good that you exist!" Moreover, in addition to being the gift of life, parental love nurtures what it has brought into existence, wanting growth and fulfillment for all. This agapic love is revolutionary, for it loves the weak and vulnerable as well as the strong and beautiful. No human love can, of course, be perfectly just and impartial, but parental love is the best metaphor we have for imaging the creative love of God."¹⁰

How can "saving presence" be defined? "Saving" means to "make whole." Taking a cue from the Native Americans we could use their definition of wisdom - that people may live. This does not mean mere survival.

Living implies beauty, freedom of choice, giving birth, discipline, celebration. Living is not the same as going shopping or buying, nor is it the same as making a nest in which to escape the sufferings of one another. Living has something to do with Eros, love of life, and with the love of others' lives, others' right to Eros and dignity.¹¹

Matthew Fox lifts up the Parental imagery of God using the concept of royalty. He quotes Meister Eckhart, a sixteenth century theologian:

Every human person is an aristocrat. Every human person is noble and of royal blood, born from the intimate depths of the divine nature and the divine wilderness.¹²

Fox outlines three stages of a theology of the royal person in Israel.

First, God is King. This means God is with people, leading them. (Emmanuel - God with us). God is Creator (Cf. Psalm 149:2, 95:3-5, 47:1-2, 7-8, 93:1-2). God cares for the world, that it live in justice and equity (Psalm 96:10-13, 97:1-2, 98:8-9, 99:4).

¹⁰ McFague, op. cit., 103.

¹¹ Fox, Matthew, Original Blessing, (Sante Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), 9.

¹² Fox, op cit., 94.

Second, the human king is imbued with the Spirit of God. God has entrusted to humanity the care for and preservation of the world (II Samuel 23:2-4). Though this is getting ahead of ourselves, we must recognize that the trust God expects from believers has already been practiced by God in entrusting people with this world.

Third, there is the expectation of the Messiah, the King who comes to rule in the final age.

In a sense a regal figure of a King and an intimate figure of a parent do not gel. However, if we see ourselves as children of the King the perspective changes. Actually, this idea is inherent in the word "generous," a word Paul uses to describe the Corinthian Christians. The root meaning of "generous" is "of noble birth."

Can such a description befit all of creation? Can everything be considered children of nobility from the smallest of life to the greatest? Why not? The next time you know you have treated a part of God's creation with hostility or indifference, like the pesky boxelder bug that flies around my office and irritates me to no end, would your behavior be different if you conceived that being to be of noble birth?

In fairy tales and Native American stories we find animals becoming humans and vice versa. There is the sense in these earthly, magical stories of nobility and powerful figures changing in one instance from a frog to a prince and in another from a boy to a buffalo. These are noble creatures.

The Jerusalem Bible translates Psalm 110:3 this way:

Royal dignity was yours from the day you were born, on the
holy mountains,
royal from the womb, from the dawn of your earliest days.

The image of God as a parent is a comforting image to some and a fearsome image to others. Not all parents are loving and nurturing. In some ways the parent can be the object of a rebellious child.

The parent being described here is ideal. Yet, there is inherent in human parenthood a desire to do the best for the child, though there may be a debate among people what is the "best."

Again, Sallie McFague:

God . . . is primarily involved not in the negative business of judging wayward individuals but in the positive business of creating with our help a just ecological economy for the well-being of all . . . creatures. God . . . is the one who establishes justice, not

the one who hands out sentences. . . God is concerned with establishing justice now, not with condemning the future.¹³

God is the noble parent of a creation of noble children. His primary attribute is His saving presence.

Luther has a parental image of God that is stated this way:

He has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers.

He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day.

God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil.

All this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it.

Luther's God may have been a tormenting God for him at one time in his life. But his brief statement here shows God as one who supports and nurtures. What is important for Luther is that God's goodness and mercy as expressed in God's care grow from God's nature and not from God's interpretation of and response to human depravity.

God is graceful. The work of God is renewing and mending and making things well. What is remarkable is that God initiates and sustains the action in spite of our undeserving nature.

Joseph Sittler describes "instances" of grace this way:

Grace is the empowerment of salvation by God, and its working is unfolded in structures parallel to man's knowledge of damnation. Grace is God's seeking and finding man as the lost one. Grace is God's benevolent disposition toward and action on behalf of man who is trapped in evil; grace is the forgiveness of sins. Grace is the surety of God's reality and meaning when damnation takes the form of meaninglessness. Grace is the placement of man in a community of redemption and reconciliation when abandonment and isolation is the form of the human hurt. Grace is the supply of strength when weakness is characteristic of the human effort. Grace is the yes of the evangel to every no of the world-within, the world-among, and the impenetrable world-around. Grace is the presence of the eternal in the evanescence of the temporal. Grace is the promise and power

¹³ McFague, op. cit., 117-118.

of life at the moment of death - even of those little dyings that occur before death. Grace is intrinsic in all that God has made."¹⁴

Adaptation and survival in the natural world can be interpreted as the work of the Present Saving Parent - God. It is the process whereby species are nurtured and continued.

Adaptation is a process that occurs through a series of births of a species in which characteristics of the species are adapted so that the specie can survive and reproduce. This would affect its color, its structure, its behavior patterns, etc.

Survival is the strategy of each individual specie. In most cases this is innate. One of the goals of the specie is to continue its own.

For some folks this notion may be difficult because it suggests that life is different today than when the world first came into being. There is evidence to this effect provided through studies of fossils. Either God is playing a game with us by planting some artistic creations in the ground or these fossils are a record of natural history.

The point is this: in the process of all interaction God is involved to make possible the wholeness and completeness of an entity. God is not static. God is not the watchmaker who puts the world into order and is removed from it, waiting in heaven for the folks to arrive.

As God is involved in the human history of the world so is God involved in the natural history. God's love is love of all creation. God is not separated from anything.

This notion is probably palatable to most people today. Chances are we have confined God's saving action only to people and not extended it to the non-human world.

This notion has merit also because it does fit comfortably with the mutualism we see in the natural process. It is not uncommon for us to point out the way plants and animals benefit one another, pollination being a prime example.

However, in the adaptation process there is the "dark side." It is called "antagonism."¹⁵ Along with the beneficial relationships there are the defensive measures. One animal wards off another. There is hurt and pain. Have you ever walked through a patch of stinging nettle? Or have you picked a tick off the skin? What have you said then about a benevolent deity?

¹⁴ Sittler, Joseph, Essays on Nature and Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 13.

¹⁵ Grant, Susan, Beauty and the Beast - the Coevolution of Plants (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1984), 2.

In reflecting upon the antagonistic character of nature one cannot use it for the demonstration of God. However, God can help us understand our natural world.

When God is viewed as one who comes to be involved in the saving process one can better deal with antagonistic adaptive behavior.

Another issue also sallies forth. In the course of natural events certain species become extinct. They are replaced by others. What happened to the dinosaurs? Did they all evolve into something else or did some of them die off? The answer is yes.

It is not unlikely that species will have lived out their lives. The death of a species when observing the whole ecosystem is not much different than the death of one of the members of the species. Once it has lived out its life something else takes its place. One can say that its destiny has been fulfilled.

Later in this paper the issue of extinction caused by the influence of human decision and action will be addressed.

For now, however, it may be helpful to see that within the natural process of life, the cooperation of plant and animal life as well as the defense mechanisms that cause antagonism, we can see a God involved in the process, not removed from it.

NATURAL

The words that appear in the First Creation Story in Genesis always intrigue me, "And God saw that it was good." To me these words stand out in sharp contrast to words we often hear within the religious community, "And God said it was bad."

I am a firm believer in the Confession of Sins as a part of the liturgy. I believe we should lift up our sinful nature to recognize it for what it is. But I also feel we should hear and feel the word "good." Granted, we hear that word in the pronouncement of forgiveness. At the same time I think we need to see good for its own sake.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thankfulness. I Timothy 4:4

When God calls something "good," I believe the word means complete, whole, having its own integrity, natural.

Natural? Natural! What raises the question is that within the Christian community the word "natural" is related to sin. "We are by nature sinful and unclean" according to the Prayer of Confession and Forgiveness in the Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal. And while the Lutheran Book of Worship changed the statement, "We are in bondage to

sin and cannot free ourselves," it is no less convicting. By these words we are stating the human dilemma of being sinful. It is a condition of life that can be dealt with, but not avoided. As Psalm 51 says, "In sin did my mother conceive me." Wretched person that I am I do not even deserve the grace of God. Sin is inherent in the human animal. The word "nature" is diminished in value.

Yet natural also has a positive side. It is not to be glorified or divinized. However, it should not be condemned or satanized either. "Natural" as used above is intended to describe the human condition as it is. "Natural" used to describe the all encompassing sinful world community is to acknowledge the human/non-human world as it is.

The difficulty for some at this point is where sin enters into the picture. For now, this issue is suspended to be dealt with in the next chapter. At present, we are looking at the blessing, the ideal side of the human contribution to the world, rather than what humans take from the world - how we are to live with the world rather than against it.

Matthew Fox, a Dominican scholar, who is a promoter of creation-centered spirituality, has accused the Christian Church of what he calls Fall/Redemption theology. It is a theology that first establishes guilt and then shows a way out. He resists the idea of original sin.

His positive emphasis is called, as the title of his book, Original Blessing. He writes of his position in this way:

Like any parent, God loves her creation and that love which is an unconditional sending forth into existence is blessing. God's creation is desirable; that means it is a blessing. . . . Blessing involves relationship: one does not bless without investing something of oneself into the receiver of one's blessing. And one does not receive blessing oblivious of its gracious giver. A blessing spirituality is a relating spirituality. And if it is true that all of creation flows from a single, loving source, then all of creation is blessed and is a blessing, atom to atom, molecule to molecule, organism to organism, land to plants, plants to animals, animals to other animals, people to people, and back to atoms, molecules, plants, fishes. . . .

Biblical theologian Claus Westermann, in his excellent study Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church, points out that there are two basic ways by which the God of the Bible deals with humankind: by deliverance and by blessing. . . .

Ironically, the fall/redemption tradition, in its overemphasis on sin, guilt, and introspection, has actually managed to deaden the meaning of salvation itself. As Westermann points out, 'it is assumed that everyone knows' what salvation means, but in fact we do not. By leaving creation out, the myriad theologians preoccupied with 'salvation history' have succumbed to distorting the

scriptures, as Westermann indicates. 'No concept of history that excludes or ignores God's activity in the world of nature can adequately reflect what occurs in the Old Testament between God and his people.'

The God of the Covenant is the God of blessing. The promises made to Israel are promises of good things, of fruitful lands, of healthy children and wholesome living. And Israel is to bless Yahweh in return for this lavish gift.

For Yahweh your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of streams of water, of fountains and springs flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, and of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey which you will not eat bread in poverty, in which you will not lack anything . . . you shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless Yahweh your God in the good land which he has given you. (Deut. 8:7-10)

Blessing is not an abstraction to the people who knew Yahweh the Creator God. Blessing is about survival and about enjoying life's basic gifts. When it came time for the aging Isaac to bless his son, these were his words: "May God give to you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and much grain and wine." (Gen. 27:28)¹⁶

Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed recognizes that there is something incumbent in the world (dare we say the natural world) where good is done for human welfare.

God has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers.

God provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day.

Maybe we take this too much for granted. Food, clothing, work, etc. just happen. When the opposite occurs, bodies destroyed, hunger, nakedness, homelessness, divorce, unemployment and underemployment, and withholding of things needed for basic survival, then we look at the causes and blame the depravity of humanity.

One of the mentors of the emerging ecological consciousness is a man from Wisconsin mentioned earlier who wrote masterfully and persuasively in the late 1940's, Aldo Leopold. His classic piece is A Sand County Almanac in which he puts forth his conservation and land ethic.

Though Leopold does not speak in religious terms his ethic emerges from an attitude that the created order is good. He does not see the

¹⁶ Fox, op. cit., 44-45.

creation as a variety of entities or commodities but as a whole, a community.

His way of advocating a shift in our perception of the natural world is to say that we should appraise things as being natural, wild, and free. He contrasts this with a prevailing mood that humans create things to be unnatural, tame, and confined.

It is the arrogance of humanity to want to control, to dictate, to be the final decision maker about all things. We design things so they are shaped around us and create the unnatural, the tame, and the confined. Can the creation be as it is? Do we need to manipulate it? Can it be left on its own in a natural state?

Some have understood the statement in Genesis that humanity is to have dominion over the land to mean to subdue and conquer it. Not unless we have all things serving the purpose of humanity does a thing have worth. Not unless all is under our control have we done our job.

Lynn White argues in the essay cited above that the conquest of nature in the Western world emerges from the theology of the Western Church that emphasized that "sin was moral evil, and that salvation was found in right conduct."¹⁷

It is critics like this who point at a truth, but who miss the point of the truth, too. Chances are, if White understood sin and grace as the thrust of the Church's proclamation rather than sin and law he may have drawn the same conclusions. Some Christians tend to hold nature hostage to the will of and service to humanity. They see their role in the order of creation as being the conquerors.

For some Christians grace is anthropocentric. It is God's divine action, the encounter with Jesus Christ, the promise of life after death. The non-human world is a part of the temporal structure that will be dismantled and rendered obsolete when a new heaven and a new earth appear after the Second Coming of Christ. This leads for many to conclude that any disruption of the universe natural or created by human behavior is probably within the will of God. They will then say, "Let the whole creation blow itself up. We have our ticket to heaven." The environment, the whole ecosystem, is separated from the divine-human encounter, the grace of God. Grace is for people. It is for people to go to a life after death.

On the other hand, the ecosystem can be perceived as the arena of grace. This is how Luther understands it. Review his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. Grace embraces all of the human and non-human world. Sittler says:

¹⁷ White, op. cit., 21.

When encountered in (God's) deed of grace in Jesus Christ, it so places the child of grace within existence that the world of persons, things, processes, and all mortal engagements with them is proposed to the mind and spirit as a veritable theatre of grace.¹⁸

Thus, the critic misses the point of the truth in the Christian tradition. In fact, when the Christian understands God's saving presence as a parent, God's graceful encounter with all the world in Christ, one cannot draw the conclusion that Christian theology, unless distorted as it has been, contributes to a mind set of conquest. It leads to another conclusion, and that conclusion is that the human has responsibility for the care of the earth as God has chosen to care gracefully for all of creation.

To have dominion according to Scripture is to have the responsibilities of stewardship and management of the earth. God's creation does not exist for the human. It exists for itself. It has its own integrity. By its very nature it is good.

Leopold says:

In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.¹⁹

Regardless of how a person sees the emerging of various species in the evolving of creation we recognize there was a period of time in which the natural world managed itself without human intervention. It was natural, wild, and free. Humans were not wandering the earth to tame and contain it. (Only the Second Creation story in Genesis has humans being created first.)

Paleontology offers abundant evidence that wilderness maintained itself for immensely long periods; that its component species were rarely lost, neither did they get out of hand; that weather and water built soil as fast or faster than it was carried away.²⁰

The birth metaphor acknowledges that human beings are a part of the biota. All things are creatures of God. Each person has his/her niche. We are interdependent upon one another. And we live in community.

The niche is not a small piece of staked turf. It is an entity's task and responsibility within a specific ecosystem. Each being has its

¹⁸ Sittler, op. cit., 13.

¹⁹ Leopold, op. cit., 240.

²⁰ Ibid., 274.

contributions. This leads to interdependence among the variety of entities and results in an identifiable community. Interestingly enough it is the community that gives meaning to each individual entity.

The human animal, therefore, is not a cut above the rest of creation. Humanity shares with all of creation its niche.

Jenny White Cloud said:

As you know we Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never-ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers; the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a locust, even the smallest flower you can find - they are all relatives. We end our prayers with the word mitkuye oyasin - 'all my relations' - and that includes everything that grows, crawls, runs, creeps, hops, and flies on this continent. White people see man as nature's master and conqueror, but Indians, who are close to nature, know better.²¹

In Genesis 2 man is fashioned from the dust of the ground just like the animals. There is an "authentic affinity between the man and the animal kingdom."²² There is affinity in fact with all of creation.

The difficulty with this perspective is that so much of what humanity has done has subdued the earth and shaped it. It has not entirely been done to intentionally destroy. One could call it progress, culture, creativity. Many would claim this has all been done for the sake of God and to God's glory.

David Attenborough in The Living Planet helps us see this point:

Living organisms are extraordinarily adaptable. Species, far from being fixed and immutable, evolve with a speed that is well able to match most geological and climatic change. Owls, colonising the far north, developed the thicker, whiter plumage that now keeps them warm and inconspicuous on the snow-covered tundra. Wolves, finding their habitat changing to desert or extending their territory into it, lost their thick fur, and so their bodies do not overheat. Antelope, moving out from forests and grazing on open savannahs, grew longer legs and became swifter runners, and so the hazards of living in such exposed circumstances were reduced.

²¹ Erodes, Richard and Ortiz, Alfonso, American Indian Myths and Legends (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 5.

²² Siegel, Charles P. "Women, Authority and the Bible," Women and Men in the Body of Christ, A Report by the Advisory Committee for the Study on Women and Men in the Body of Christ (Division of Mission in North America, Lutheran Church in America, 1987), 46.

Man, for the first few millennia after his appearance as a new species, showed signs of the same adaptability. Eskimos, living in the Arctic, developed short, stocky bodies, the shape that tends to retain heat; Indians in the Amazonian rain forest have hairless bodies and long thin limbs, the shape that tends to lose heat. Those people who live where the sunshine is so fierce that it can damage their bodies have dark pigmentation in their skins; those in cloudier, cooler regions where sunshine is so feeble and infrequent that it is scarcely sufficient to promote the production of vitamins in the body have less pigment and pale skins.

Then, some 12,000 year ago, mankind began to show a new talent. When faced with harsh surrounding, he no longer waited many generations for his anatomy to change. Instead, he changed his surroundings. He began to modify the land in which he lived and the animals and plants on which he depended.²³

The first observable development of humanity altering the surroundings was seen in the Middle East - the dog that was the domestication of the wolf for the hunter, sheep and reindeer bred to live with and serve humans. Natural selection gave way to human selection. Species after species, animal and plant were tamed and confined. The hand of humankind was in the evolutionary process!

The introduction of the urban world brought about other changes. The first town sprung up in the Middle East some 10,000 years ago. Food came to the people. Foraging and hunting became a sport.

Today, it is no longer possible to talk about a world in which humanity plays a minor or insignificant role. Humanity's role is very much a self-conscious one of being the manager of the environment. We have much to say about whether or not the world can be natural, wild, free.

Attenborough points out:

The natural world is not static, nor has it ever been. Forests have turned into grassland, savannahs have become deserts, estuaries have silted up and become marshes, ice caps have advanced and retreated. Rapid though these changes have been, seen in the perspective of geological history, animals and plants have been able to respond to them and so maintain a continuity of fertility almost everywhere. But man is now imposing such swift changes that organisms seldom have time to adapt to them. And the scale of our changes is now gigantic. We are so skilled in our engineering, so inventive with chemicals, that we can, in a few months, transform not merely a stretch of a stream or a corner of a wood, but a whole river system, an entire forest.

²³ Attenborough, David, The Living Planet (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 291.

If we are to manage the world sensibly and effectively we have to decide what our management objectives are. . . .

First, we must not exploit natural stocks of animals and plants so intensively that they are unable to renew themselves, and ultimately disappear. This seems such obvious sense that it is hardly worth stating. Yet the anchoveta shoals were fished out in Peru, and herring has been driven away from its old breeding grounds in European waters, and many kinds of whales are still being hunted and are still in real danger of extermination.

Second, we must not so grossly change the face of the earth that we interfere with the basic processes that sustain life - the oxygen content of the atmosphere, the fertility of the seas - and that could happen if we continue destroying the earth's green cover of forests and if we continue using the oceans as a dumping ground for our poisons.

And third, we must do our utmost to maintain the diversity of the earth's animals and plants. It is not just that we depend on many of them for our food - though that is the case. It is not just that we still know so little about them or the practical value they might have for us in the future - though that, too, is so. It is, surely, that we have no moral right to exterminate for ever the creatures with which we share this earth.

As far as we can tell, our planet is the only place in all the black immensities of the universe where life exists. We are alone in space. And the continued existence of life now rests in our hands.²⁴

What does it mean to call creation "good?" It means:

1. We see integrity in all of life.
2. We recognize the human role as being one with the rest of creation.
3. We affirm that humanity has a unique role in husbanding the system through aggressive and passionate parent concern.

Sallie McFague puts it this way:

We must become the gardeners and caretakers of our Eden, our beautiful, bountiful garden, not taming and ruling it, let alone despoiling and desecrating it, as we so often do, but being to it as a universal parent, willing the existence of all species and, as a good householder, ordering the just distribution of the necessities of existence. We are, of course, speaking here of an attitude, of a role model that, if assumed, can begin to change both how one sees the world and how one acts in and toward it. If one thought of oneself as parent to the world, that is, if one moved oneself inside

²⁴ Ibid., 308.

that model and walked around in it, acting the role of parent, what changes might come about in, say, how one spent one's time, one's money, one's vote? The universalizing of our most basic loves, extending them beyond the confines of our immediate families and primary communities and even beyond our own species, is, I believe, the necessary direction in our search for models for behavior in an ecological, nuclear age.²⁵

WILD

Webster's New World Dictionary defines the word "wild:"

"1. living or growing in its original, natural state and not normally domesticated or cultivated . . . 2. not lived in or cultivated; overgrown, waste, etc. . . . 3. not civilized; savage . . . 4. not easily restrained or regulated; not controlled or controllable; unruly, rough, lawless, etc. . . . 5. characterized by a lack of social or moral restraint; unbridled in pursuing pleasure; dissolute, orgiastic, etc. . . . 6. violently disturbed; turbulent; stormy . . . 7. in a state of intense excitement, . . . 8. in a state of disorder, disarrangement, confusion, etc. . . . 9. fantastically impractical; visionary . . . 10. showing a lack of sound judgment; reckless; imprudent . . . 11. going wide of the mark aimed at; missing the target . . ."²⁶

Notice how the definition moves from natural order to human disarray to the inability to control. This characteristic of this word is the skeleton of this chapter.

When humans use the word "wild" it usually refers to disorder and no control. If one would survey most people they would say that the natural, untamed world is disorderly. Yet, after a careful analysis of the wilderness one discovers it is orderly. True, the wilderness is foreign to us. It smacks of movements and designs that are lacking in a tame world. But the wild has order.

Leopold speaks of the wilderness in this fashion:

Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization.

Wilderness was never a homogeneous raw material. It was very diverse, and the resulting artifacts are very diverse. These differences in the end-product are known as cultures. The rich

²⁵ McFague, op. cit., 120-121.

²⁶ Guralnik, David B., Webster's New World Dictionary (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 1626.

diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth.

For the first time in the history of the human species, two changes are now impending. One is the exhaustion of wilderness in the more habitable portions of the globe. The other is the world-wide hybridization of cultures through modern transport and industrialization. Neither can be prevented, and perhaps should not be, but the question arises whether, by some slight amelioration of the impending changes, certain values can be preserved that would otherwise be lost.

To the laborer in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was wilderness an adversary to the pioneer.

But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to life. This is a plea for the preservation of some tax-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of their cultural inheritance.²⁷

What humans call "wild" in the natural world is not only order, but order begetting order. Tornadoes and floods, snow, rain, and wind storms, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are part of the order of things. They involve forces that destroy. They also give new life. This may be disruption. But it is also ordering. The word "wild" is akin to "natural" as described in the previous chapter.

"Wild" as disruptiveness and chaos is best understood in the human world. Here it implies no order, no limits, no control. It is an earthly mark of human rebellion against God and against God's creation.

Ironically, "wild" denoting human behavior addresses the human desire to conquer, to tame, and to control for one's own purpose. It is tantamount to sin, the rejection of communal life.

McFague says:

To sin is . . . to refuse to take responsibility for nurturing, loving, and befriending the body and all its parts. Sin is the refusal to realize one's radical interdependence with all that lives: it is the desire to set oneself apart from all others as not needing them or being needed by them. Sin is the refusal to be the eyes, the consciousness, of the cosmos.²⁸

²⁷ Leopold, op. cit., 264-265.

²⁸ McFague, op. cit., 77.

The word "idiot" comes from a Greek word that refers to a person who thinks and behaves as though he/she does not need, relate to, nor depend upon community.

As God has created entities and ecosystems, it is the human penchant and persuasion to disrupt the system and care for it in so far as the realm can be controlled. Humanity goes wild, throws away its inhibitions, and lives for the moment without fear of consequences on the one hand and on the other hand dominates with indifference and denying the orderliness of the non-human world. This has been called traditionally "original sin."

When Luther says in the explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed that we do not deserve all that God does for us, what he is saying is that God acts in spite of humanity's nature to destroy both Creator and creation.

From the point of view of the Christian tradition, the situation is that human beings choose and act by nature to create systems that self-serve and satisfy self-interests. Rather than ecosystems, systems that recognize the interdependence of all things, people prefer, manufacture, even justify egosystems, systems that put the "I," the ego, in the middle of all things.

The behavior that endangers the world can be shown on a continuum where at one end there is the molesting of the environment for the sake of greed (e.g. allowing cattle to overgraze land) and at the other end the need for survival (the poor who gather wood at the edge of the forest to prepare their meager food supplies).

From an ecological perspective, the earth is threatened by the rapid extinction of species caused by human behavior. Root cause? Sin!

It must be pointed out up front, as Stephen Gould does in his book, The Panda's Thumb, that extinction is not simply a human induced phenomenon:

Ecosystems are not so precariously balanced that the extirpation of one species must act like the first domino in that colorful metaphor of the cold war. Indeed, it could not be, for extinction is the common fate of all species - and they cannot all take their ecosystems with them. Species often have as much dependence upon each other as Longfellow's 'Ships that pass in the night.'²⁹

Extinction of species is a part of the natural process. Chances are it began three and one half billion years ago.

Extinction within the natural process is balanced by the formation of new species in the wise design of the creation. This is called

²⁹ Newsweek Magazine, March 29, 1982, 48.

"speciation." This occurs primarily because environments vary and some species do better than others in a given habitat. Thus, they survive.

The key to success is adaptation. Adaptation is possible because of the amount of genetic variability present in all things. It is this genetic variability that keeps things in the game and keeps the game going.

"Speciation" is a faucet running new species into a sink.
"Extinction" is the drain removing others.

So what is the problem? The basic problem is that in this "modern" world the faucet is not keeping up with the drain. Acceleration is occurring. Why? Because of people's impact on the environment! This is the human dilemma.

For perhaps 50,000 years people have interfaced with the environment. From the year 1600 people could, because of technology, overturn animals to extinction in just a few years and thereby disrupt the environment extensively and rapidly.

Between 1600 and 1900 people eliminated about 75 known species, mostly mammals and birds. Since 1900 people have eliminated about 75 known species. From 1960 on the extinction rate has soared. The conservative estimate is that beginning in 1984 100 species world-wide have been driven to extinction annually. As of the 1980's we are facing a situation where each hour of each day of every year one species becomes extinct.³⁰

By eliminating an appreciable portion of the earth's stock of species, humanity might be destroying life that just might be its own. Some biologists believe that humankind is altering evolution (which is logical in terms of this theory) and altering it for the worse.

Humanity's pressure on species is both direct and indirect - by both over exploitation and by habitat modification and destruction: over hunting, over fishing, over harvesting, destroying, and altering natural habitats.

What difference does it make if species become extinct? None, as long as there are new species able to take the place of others to perform certain functions and as long as the extinction does not become so rapid that speciation is completely frustrated. It is the maintaining of species that provides for the survival of genetic capabilities.

Look at the alligators. They have been the object of many an entrepreneur. What difference does it make if they become extinct? They are vital elements of saw grass marsh ecosystems in the Florida

³⁰ Myers, Norman, The Sinking Ark (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), 4-5.

Everglades. With their tails, alligators scoop out depressions 10 feet to 100 feet wide. Scarce water collects in these "alligator holes" in the dry season. This permits a variety of aquatic and semiaquatic organisms, including plankton, fishes, frogs, turtles, and the alligators to survive until the rain season refloods the Everglades.³¹ The loss of alligators would have a profound impact on a variety of species.

The concern is that extinction is being caused by human activity and thereby shutting down the natural flow. Thus, the process by which diversity can be regenerated is affected.

As noted in the illustration of the alligators, only some species have dollar value. The majority of species do not. Thus, when the value of the land (the habitat) is based on selfish economic motives, is it not a logical consequence that if the majority of the species have no dollar value then the land is treated with indifference? Species in general are not subject to "property rights." No one looks after them. They are "common property." Since they belong to everyone they are treated as if they belong to no one.

Thus, the dilemma is the disruption of community, the extinction of habitat(s). It is not the extinction of a specific species that will make a significant difference. It is how the habitats are affected in general. An individual can exploit a tiger and thereby affect other things in the habitat. However, more than likely, an individual can exploit the tiger's habitat for a variety of purposes: timber, firewood, livestock grazing, or cultivation.³² Herein is the problem.

The key to extinction is change in either the physical or the biological environment.³³ When a habitat is disrupted it is difficult if not impossible to rectify it. An example of this is when the plow is put to the virgin soil where native herbs exit. Once the land is torn up by the plow native prairie plants will not naturally return if the land is left untouched. Other plants take their place and grow more rapidly. The only way for the native plants to return is by human beings finding them elsewhere and reintroducing them.

Individual cases of selfish exploitation can be cited, but the difficulty is in the attitudes of great numbers of people and the increase in the world's population. Natural environments are impacted because of the numerous products needed to satisfy customer demands. Affluent sectors of the global village are responsible, unknowingly but

³¹ Ehrlich, Paul and Anne, Extinction (New York: Random House, 1981), 8.

³² Myers, Op. Cit., 29

³³ Ehrlich, Op. Cit., 29.

effectively, for the disruption of myriad species' habitats in lands far distant from their own.

Forest lands are also depleted by the poor for firewood, but there is no comparison with the world's rich minority who, for example, have destroyed forests in Central America to create artificial pasturelands to grow more beef for the hamburger trade and other fast food businesses in the United States.³⁴

Another major cause of extinction of habitats is the way people practice farming, an area that is sacred in the minds of most people. Aldo Leopold puts it in a challenging way when he says:

...what remains of our native fauna and flora remains only because agriculture has not got around to destroying it. The present ideal of agriculture is clean farming; clean farming means a food chain aimed solely at economic profit and purged of all non-conforming links, a sort of Pax Germanica of the agricultural world.³⁵

The fact of population increase also presents some interesting issues. More is necessary for feeding the world. Diversity, which is necessary for the stability of species and genes and productivity of the land, is jeopardized. More land is also necessary for living space. Myers, in Sinking Ark, anticipates that this one fact alone will drive anywhere from one fifth to one half of the wild animal population to extinction.³⁶ Community/habitat and disruption/destruction are at the heart of the matter.

One of the pressing concerns in recent years is the disposition of toxic and hazardous waste. Practices of disposing such material that date back many years are now creating problems by contaminating underground water supplies. Landfills that were considered only land sores are now becoming cancers in the system. Today, there are careless practices in the way certain things are disposed of: paint thinners, home pesticides, bleaches, and old TV sets (the PCBs are the problem).³⁷

Habitat disruption has serious human implications as well. Inequities occur, resulting in hunger, injustice, and war. The pressing story of Ethiopia brings the problem into striking relief.

Habitats are disrupted and destroyed as the result of sin. Sin is both acts of commission and omission. It is what we do, what we do not

³⁴ Myers, Op. Cit., 8-10.

³⁵ Leopold, Op. Cit., 199.

³⁶ Myers. Op. Cit., 48.

³⁷ "Hazardous Waste . . . Story up Trouble," National Geographic, March, 1985, 318.

do, and what we are. As sinners we act to exploit our world, making an ecosystem an egosystem. Sin also is how we act regardless of how sinless our motives may appear to be. There are no sinless alternatives!

Sin is described as arrogance, missing the mark, rebellion, incompleteness, egocentricity. It affects what we think, believe, as well as what we do. Sin is both individual and corporate.

Adam wanted to be like God. Cain chose not to be responsible for his brother. The human situation is the desire to be the creator and not the creature. The world is a toy which serves private purposes.

The Ehrlichs say that the ultimate form of arrogance is to play God by pushing organisms out of existence. The notion is that the only important life form is the human being.³⁸ Ironically, they advise that to sell people on the preservation of habitats one must demonstrate how species and habitats serve humanity. Either way, destruction and restoration of habitats have sin at their heart.

Thus, "wild," as understood as no order, chaos, disruption, indifference to control, and the need to control, fits the human condition Christians call sin. This stands in contrast to "wild" meaning that which is natural and orderly.

There is a third characteristic to the word "wild" that needs to be addressed. Wild is when things are out of control. In our generation the ultimate end over which we have no control is the unleashing of nuclear power which could result in the death of birth, no less the death of death.

This discussion, up until very recently, usually revolved around a nuclear holocaust. But there are other slower processes that humans have set into motion, e.g. the disposing of toxic materials and the wanton destruction of habitats.

The human capacity to unleash the destruction of the earth means that we hold the reins in our hands.

To respect the process of birth one respects all of creation's freedom to be. Fulfillment is to allow all of creation to live out its potential. The role of the human is to serve as the parent.

Recognizing these ways to understand the world "wild" should affect our behavior.

- * In the non-human world, the wilderness, the wilds - orderliness is its character.

³⁸ Ehrlich, Op. Cit., 49.

- * In the human world "wild" has two meanings: The first is the human raging and indifference toward the world - where everything is me first. The second is a denial of the wild world that requires humans to control and conquer it.
- * Wild has to do with the future. When something is out of control it moves beyond the present. Humanity has the capacity to create such a future, a future that can mean not only the death of birth, but the death of death. This does not deal solely with nuclear power. What all have we dumped into the earth that will impair the future?

FREEDOM

How can we live out this understanding of the birth metaphor?

Luther concludes the explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: "We are to thank and praise, serve and obey him."

We are creatures of God who have been set free. Someone has described the Cross as "God's birthing chair" - the throne of travail, hard labor, anguish. Yet, in the meekness is new life.³⁹ Thus, in Christ we have been given new birth.

We have the experience of our first birth which brings us into solidarity with all of creation. We also have our second birth which empowers us to live freely to serve the world.

We are set free to free the world. We are called to pass life along. As in natural birth we are co-creators with God who is the source of life.

We should become mothers and fathers to the world, extending those natural instincts we all have, whether or not we have children of our bodies (or adopted children), to what Jonathan Schell calls 'universal parenthood.'⁴⁰

To pass life along does not only mean to procreate or to permit life to be procreated. It also means to set up systems where that which is can survive and be fruitful and multiply.

³⁹ Fullenwieder, Jann E. Boyd, "Labor unto Death: a Theology of the Cross" ("Woman and Men in the Body of Christ," 1987), 58-59.

⁴⁰ McFague, op. cit., 119.

In the January 18, 1988 issue of Newsweek there was an article entitled "Making Nature Whole Again." It is a story about people who are investing their lives in the restoring of the environment.

The fix-it men of the environment are here. Not content to merely lobby for antipollution laws or sue to keep a developer from building on a bird sanctuary, they are repairing what humanity has already damaged. They are determined to do no less than turn back the calendar to the days when buffalo roamed the prairie and salmon ran as thick as molasses. An early example of such 'restoration ecology' was reclaiming strip-mined land. But today's restorers go beyond replacing topsoil. They are also replanting entire tropical forests, rebuilding streams and re-creating wetlands in hundreds of projects from Costa Rica to Maine.⁴¹

The task before us is to live with the world not against it, to co-exist and not to control, to live within the rights of the other, to assure "justice for all."

One day I was standing on a patio eating refreshments with many Church professionals. I noticed a small group of people absorbed in something that was happening at their feet. I discovered that it was an ant pulling a toothpick across the cement surface of the patio.

Apparently, the observers tormented the ant on several occasions by removing the toothpick. But undaunted as soon as the ant found the toothpick he would continue his effort.

The patio was large and made of concrete. One could only guess where the ant was going. The only evidence that the ant knew its way was that it continued on a straight line.

It was time for dinner, and we were called into the main dining room. The ant was still about its task. Obviously, we were going to miss out on the outcome of this event.

Then the human intervener enters. One of the adults reaches down and picks up the ant and the toothpick. It is obvious that the ant is irritated. It runs all over the person's hands. The intruder was able to manage the ant's antics and bring him to the edge of the patio and place him in the dirt.

As I watched the development I began to wonder why the "adult" intervened. Was it for the sake of the person's fulfilling a need to dominate and control or was it for the fulfillment and welfare of the ant? Was it essential that there be human intervention?

We think we know best. We have a sense of destiny and future. We are endowed with power to decide in ways other creatures cannot. To

⁴¹ Newsweek, January 18, 1988, 78.

what extent does this give the human animal the right to control? Are there ants' rights?

To be able to shape a world where justice prevails for all of creation requires that we become politically competent. I believe there is such a thing as "ants' rights." We need to challenge a world that does not allow freedom and also denies fulfillment. Does the suffering in the Third World come from a lack of food or the lack of will? Hunger is a political and distribution problem. Hunger is caused by sin against ones neighbor, to control them and to withhold their rights to be free.

Freedom is to enable the world to realize its fulfillment. How can we do this? Here are a few of the answers.

We can see to it that justice is ordered. George Johnson in "Preaching and World Hunger" in Lutheran Partners says,

Justice is the very essence of God, as love is. It is the action of God to bring deliverance to oppressed, suffering, lost people. It is part of what the Bible calls salvation. It is God's action to free people from the power of sin and evil. Justice is good news to the poor, the blind, and others who are oppressed by evil. It is the restoration of right relationships. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice...

Like God's desire to forgive, so his desire to correct injustice is not limited to something for the next life. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation and salvation is wholeness of one's being. Jesus came to bring the abundant life, beginning now.⁴²

We can impart wisdom - pleasure. Pleasure is how the Greeks define wisdom. "Taste and see how good the Lord is," shouts the Psalmist.

Pleasure can be interpreted as self-gratification or it can be interpreted as fulfillment. Interestingly enough the words pleasure, thanksgiving, and grace all come from the same root Latin word.

What do we really have coming to us? (The "we" is all of creation.) We can roll in the mud of sin and say, "We deserve absolutely nothing." However, in God's wisdom (pleasure?) all of creation can live to its fullest in terms of what it has within itself (genes) and what it has from without (culture/environment).

We can extend the invitation to the oppressed to be free. This is no small task. Who are the oppressed? Those who are held captive and

⁴² Johnson, George S., "Preaching and World Hunger," Lutheran Partner, March/April, 1988, 16.

denied fulfillment from within and/or without. Sometimes people do not know that freedom is possible.

We look with horror at the hungry people of the world. We rue the day that we would be subjected to such a plight. What reaction do you think a hungry person would have if he/she would observe the world that we take for granted. As their experience is beyond our experience, so is our's beyond theirs.

Our mission is not to bring our world to others. It is to help others realize fulfillment within their world. They are invited to be free, to move in their minds and hearts as well as bodies to a new understanding and way of life.

We can contribute to the transformation of life. This has two aspects. The first is obvious. Things can be better: the naked can be clothed, the hungry fed, etc.

There needs to be transformation on our part, too. We need to reset our priorities in terms of use of wealth and power. Our political wills must be reshaped.

We hear a lot today about creating a moral atmosphere in our country. Politicians are running on this platform. Their concern is right, but their objective is wrong. Morality involves transforming our entire mode of behavior, personally and socially, so that the world and all that is in it can be fulfilled. Morality is not simply the fulfillment of one's personal life. It is a community issue.

H. Paul Santmire concludes his book, The Travail of Nature:

This is the question, then, more than any other . . .

Is the final aim of God, in his governance of all things, to bring into being at the very end a glorified kingdom of spirits alone who, thus united with God, may contemplate him in perfect bliss, while as a precondition of their ecstasy all the other creatures of nature must be left by God to fall away into eternal oblivion?

Or is the final aim of God, in his governance of all things, to communicate his life to another in a way which calls forth at the very end new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, a transfigured cosmos where peace is universally established between all creatures at last, in the midst of which is situated a glorious city of resurrected saints who dwell in justice, blessed with all the resplendent fullness of the earth, and who continually call upon all creatures to join with them in their joyful praise of the one who is all in all.⁴³

⁴³ Santmire, H. Paul, The Travail of Nature, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 217-218.

CONCLUSION

I introduced this paper indicating that we need to find a way to look at the Creator God and the creation of God in a fresh way that will help us address developing issues in our day.

Hopefully, we have been able to see some things.

1. The world in which we live is one ecosystem. The human and non-human world is the arena where God gives birth to all of creation.

2. The threat of the destruction of the world results from the human desire to control the ecosystem. There is an innocent side to this problem. We have developed skills and knowledge about our world. These can be used for the welfare and fulfillment of life. However, when does one overstep the bounds of what is controllable and what is not? Must all of life and space be "conquered?" Intelligence is not free nor immune from sin.

Lest we forget, the destruction of the environment may be far greater in terms of present disposal methods of toxic waste than any disposition of nuclear waste or nuclear holocaust. Many past sins could put us on the verge of death of birth.

3. How do we use scientific theories? Does a change in theory alter our understanding of the world, God, and Scripture? We stand on the top of an explosion of knowledge. One day we thought ants on a particular plant caused the plants destruction. Recently we have learned that ants are that plants bodyguards.

Scientific theory and understanding should be alterable. Our theology needs to be based on God not our scientific knowledge. This puts us back to the Scriptures and the experience of the faithful people.

To view our world from a birth metaphor unchains us from the scientific-religious arguments.

4. The present challenge in the political arena and the courts of justice is coming from the conservative right. We need to be clear about what they are saying and what the other side is saying. Over what is the debate? Are the issues clear?

The basic legitimate concern of the conservatives is the authority of Scripture. Does Scripture have authority? Over what?

Scripture is the norm and rule of faith and life. It is the Church's book. It is the record of God acting, speaking, creating, sustaining, redeeming in the past, the present and the future.

The Biblical tradition presents a God who is involved in creation. This should be the starting point rather than debates over what ancient writers may have intended.

5. **Humans** live in solidarity with all of creation. This includes those who are without. We cannot avoid the issue. We belong to each other. We are all brought into existence by birth. We are not conquerors of the world. We are co-creators and co-parents with God. We are part of the birthing process.