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2-22-2022

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Recommended Citation

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Speakers & Events. 2838.
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Priests of a Fallen Creation: The Temple, Natural Theology, and Ecology in Dialogue

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Weter Lecture 2020 | Delivered February 22, 2022

It is so good to be here with you tonight, standing in front of real, live people. It's really fun to see so many familiar faces. And, with the masks I can just pretend that you're smiling the whole time!

Before going any further, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the official honoree of the Weter lecture – Dr. Winifred Weter. Unfortunately, I never met Dr. Weter, as she retired when I was negative one. But I thank her for her pioneering work at SPU. I'd also like to thank the benefactor of the Weter lecture (and the patron saint of field biology at SPU), Professor Emeritus of Biology, Ross Shaw. I did have the honor of meeting Dr. Shaw before he passed away, and Dr. Shaw's legacy looms large at SPU. Not least of which is the Blakely Island Field Station. It was my tour of our field station 16 years ago that convinced me to move from Pennsylvania to Seattle. I have never regretted that decision. Thank you, Dr. Shaw.

I'd also like to thank the organizers (Raedene, Lucy, and FLO), the facilitators (ETM, Facilities, CIS, University Communications, SPU Catering). I'd also like to thank Mathea Kurtz-Shaw, a senior biology honors student who has volunteered to be my accompanist tonight. More on that in a minute. And, lastly, I'd like to thank the many folks who, over the years, have let me bounce some very ill-formed ideas off them. I especially thank my wife, Carina, for her tireless patience and thoughtful insights. My long-suffering students have been subjected to more than one rant on many of these topics. My colleagues, especially in biology and theology, have supported me as I've chased down some pretty hair-brained ideas, many of which thankfully didn't make the final cut for tonight. And, Steve Perisho, our theology and philosophy librarian, was an invaluable resource, always opening doors when I was seemingly at a dead end. A special shout out goes to my friend and theology professor, Mike Langford, who always provided valuable feedback, gently reminding me of such truths as God's omnipotence and omnipresence, pulling me back to the center, should I ever start to drift a bit too far. It should go without saying, then, that any theological errors or heresies that remain in this talk are, of course, entirely Mike's.

I am an ecologist. And, before we get much further, we should probably make sure we're all on the same page with what that means. So, what is an ecologist? Ecologists like field guilds, so let me give you some identifying features: granola-eating, tree-hugging, long-haired, hippie scientist. You know, if the Birkenstock fits...

OK – so while that may describe many ecologists, it doesn't define ecology. As any veteran of my intro biology course should be able to tell you, ecology is the scientific study of the interactions that determine the distribution and abundance of organisms. Ecology is all about interactions...relationships. As such we love arrows. Lots and lots of arrows. Whether it's tracing the flow of nitrogen through salmon and bears and into trees, or looking at how carbon may be drawn from the atmosphere by forests, or investigating food webs on the Pacific coast, we love our arrows. Now, as much as I love this last diagram, drawn by my ecology colleague Ryan Ferrer, there is one food web diagram I like a bit better. This one was a gift to me from my son, who is in the audience. Congratulations, Torin – you're published! I'm not sure which I like better, the plankton at the bottom of the food chain, or the seal at the top.

Anyway, in tonight's lecture, I'd like to examine some relationships, namely - the relationship between humans and non-human creation. How were we originally called to relate with creation? What's gone wrong? What's the path forward? Many of us are familiar with the language of "stewards of creation." Stewardship indicates that we do not own the land and that we care for it on another's behalf. I like that. Stewardship emphasizes the need for wise management. I like that. However, the focus on management has been criticized for over-

emphasizing creation's production of resources. I hear that criticism and take the point, but I think the model of stewardship still works, even if it's not perfect. What I would like to do tonight, then, is to offer a complementary, rather than strictly alternative, model of our relationship with creation.

To do this, we obviously need, first and foremost, good Biblical theology. Additionally, I think we can learn about this relationship between humans and the rest of creation by developing good natural theology as well. For those familiar with the debate, you'll know that not everyone is wild about the idea of natural theology. Chief among the critics is Karl Barth. What Barth criticized was the idea that we could reason up to God through first principles of science. Barth's right: no natural theology can work up to God or work out a systematic theology of the trinity. But, this reasoning up from first principles is not necessarily what natural theology must be about.

Alistair McGrath, a scientist and theologian has written a lot about natural theology. And, McGrath says "Natural theology is not intended to prove the existence of God, but presupposes that existence; it then asks 'what should we expect the natural world to be like if it has indeed been created by such a God.'" ¹ Rather than studying nature to prove the existence of God, we use what McGrath calls Christian natural theology, where we begin with biblical theology and then study nature as creation. McGrath calls this a "Theology of Nature" or what we might call "A Theological Ecology." And, maybe, just maybe, we can get ole Barth to buy into this type of natural theology.

So, I mentioned that ecologists like arrows. And, in this theological ecology, we can look at multiple relationships among God, humans, and non-human creation. ("Non-human creation" is a little cumbersome, so in the rest of this talk, I'll often refer to non-human creation simply as creation, but humans are most definitely part of creation!) Tonight, I won't try to unpack all these relationships, but I would like to focus on three. What is the *mission* God has for humans, especially with regard to creation. What is the *vision* that God has for his creation? And what is the *vocation* of humans regarding non-human creation?

As we study these relationships within creation, we can't help but to learn more about the creator. As Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Any error about creation also leads to an error about God," so studying creation carefully ought to *clarify* our thinking on God. As art historians know, we can learn about the artist by studying the art. Anyone who wants to learn about DaVinci should study not just his journals but also his paintings. Anyone studying Maya Angelou should read not just her seven(!) autobiographies (seriously – my life must be so much more boring than hers), but they should also, obviously, study her poetry. And any student of Lewis who read only his letters but not his Narnia would remain forever in the Shadowlands. To learn about the artist, study the art.

My hope for this talk is to develop a theology of nature – a theological ecology – by weaving together some insights from biblical theology and natural theology. I plan to lean on theologians from diverse denominational backgrounds, drawing from Lutherans (Terence Fretheim), Anglicans (NT Wright and John Polkinghorne), Wesleyans (Howard Snyder), Presbyterians (GK Beale), Evangelicals (Richard Middleton and John Walton), and Catholics (Pope Francis), among others. In addition to these western scholars, though, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which has been too often overlooked in the West, provides vital insights toward developing a theological ecology; and tonight I'm going to draw from contemporary Orthodox scholars such as Elizabeth Theokritoff, John Chryssavgis, Kallistos Ware, and John Zizioulas, as well as patristic theologians such as Maximus the Confessor and Irenaeus. Then, for good measure, we'll throw in some insights from my field: ecology. So, in the broadest Christian sense, I hope tonight to develop a truly ecumenical theological ecology.

¹ Alister McGrath. *Enriching Our Vision of Reality: Theology and the Natural Sciences in Dialogue*. Templeton Foundation Press, 2017.

Rhetoricians tell me that I need to clearly state my thesis, and I shouldn't bury it somewhere. So here it is. I'll argue that we cannot develop a robust theological anthropology (what does it mean to be human?) without also developing a robust theological ecology (what is the purpose of creation?). If we want to understand the origin, vocation, and destiny of humans we cannot do this apart from understanding the origin, vocation, and destiny of the entire creation.

First, the purpose (the *telos*) of creation should be understood as God's temple. The cosmos is the temple of God. Under this thinking, then, the *ethos* of humanity is understood as creation's priests. The way we relate to creation is exemplified well by the priest/temple relationship. Then the *logos* (lower case "l") of science, especially ecology, is necessary to inform our praxis as priests. Ecology gives us the information we need to guide our relationship with the rest of creation.

Then, we need to correct some (bad) theology that views creation as anthropocentric. By anthropocentric, I'm not denying that humans have a central position, but I am challenging the notion that creation exists primarily for us. Creation is theocentric; it's not anthropomonic (it's not all about us) and it's not anthropotelic (the ultimate purpose of creation is not found in humans).

We also need to correct some (bad) science that views nature misanthropically. There are plenty of documentaries that envision the world without us, suggesting that the world would be better off if we weren't here. True, many ecosystems would improve in the short term if we were to vanish. But that's short sighted.

When humans are in right relationship with creation, the relationship is neither anthropocentric nor misanthropic; rather, properly viewed creation is synanthropic. I borrowed this term from ecology. A synanthrope is a species which thrives because of humans. Think dandelions, which are definitely better off because of us. But, when humans are in right relationship with creation, *all* creation should flourish – not just dandelions.

Before I continue further, I mentioned earlier that the legacy of Dr. Ross Shaw's, tonight's benefactor, lives on at SPU. One very tangible way in which that is true is that his grand-daughter, Mathea Kurtz-Shaw, is currently a senior honors biologist (and ecotheology minor!) at SPU. Mathea is also an accomplished singer and has sung in our Treble Chorale. At my urging, Mathea has agreed to accompany me in this lecture. I have divided the remainder of the talk into 5 parts, and Mathea will introduce each part with a selection from the hymnary. So, enough with the introduction; let's dive in with Part 1: The Paradox.

Part 1: The Paradox

*In labor all creation groans,
'til fear and hatred cease,
'til human hearts come to believe
in Christ alone is peace.
Be our peace, be our peace, be our peace,
Christ our peace.²*

Let's start at the very beginning. Turns out it's a very good place to start. Who knew?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And, as God progressed through the creative days described in Genesis, we see that God repeatedly declared creation "good." Then on day 6, when the created

² *In Labor All Creation Groans*. Lyrics by Delores Hufner. (1992)

order is established, God declares that creation wasn't just good, it was "very good." So, from the beginning, we are assured that what God has made is very good.

Fast forward to Romans 8, though, and we see a different picture. Paul tells us that creation is "subjected to futility" and "in bondage to decay." "The whole creation has been "groaning together in labor pains until now." From good to groaning. What's gone wrong?

Conventional wisdom is that creation groans because the Fall ushered in death. Prior to Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, there was no death. Plants and animals and humans would have lived forever as originally intended in Edenic Paradise. "Very good" meant no disease, no suffering, no death, and creation is now groaning because those sin-tainted relationships are decaying the world.

As Alfred Lord Tennyson tells us "Man, who trusted God was love indeed, and love Creation's final law, Tho' Nature red in tooth and claw, with ravine shrieked against his creed."³ But, that conventional wisdom doesn't square well with knowledge from the natural sciences: the earth is over 4 billion years old; humans have only been around for a couple hundred thousand years. If earth's history were an hour, modern humans would have been around for only the last 0.15 seconds! So, there were literally *billions* of years of creaturely death in God's good creation that predate any possibility of human sin. Over 95% of all species that ever existed went extinct before humans even had a chance to sin. Predation and competition were rampant from the outset; nature has always been red in tooth and claw; decomposition, decay, and death were baked in; the lion has never lain with the lamb, except to eat it.

How can we consider competition, extinction, and animal suffering (which all predated humans by millennia) part of God's "very good" creation? How are we to interpret the groaning of creation and its bondage to decay if pestilence, predation, and pain have been there all along?

To begin to make sense of this paradox, we need a biblically *and* scientifically informed theology of nature. So, it may be helpful to see what ecologists consider good about the natural world. In his field-defining paper, conservationist Michael Soule devotes nearly half his essay to the normative postulates of conservation biology. He tells us what is good, but "good" is not a word used in most scientific papers. Though, to *do* the work of conservation, we need to know what's good and what's bad. Soule's first two principles state that "Biodiversity of organisms is good" and "Ecological complexity is good."⁴ To me, this sounds a lot like the "very good" state of creation at the end of Day 6, after earth's diversity and complexity have been established.

Soule's third postulate is, though, a bit rattling: "Evolution is good." Time certainly doesn't permit a full discussion of how Christian ecologists can view the long periods of creation via evolution as compatible with the Genesis account. For that, you're welcome to take my intro bio class. But, what I think is striking about this statement is not just that evolution occurred, but that "evolution is good." The goal, then, of the conservation biologist is to ensure not just that lions exist, but that lions roam the savanna and that lions continue to exert their selective pressure on zebras. In other words, what's "good" is that lions chase zebras, and that lions kill zebras, and that lions eat zebras, because those lions are contributing to the good of evolution. Nature *is* red in tooth and claw, but perhaps lions are not shrieking against any creed. Perhaps lions are doing what they were created to do. After all, as the Psalmist reminds us, "the young lions roar after their prey and seek their meat from God."⁵

³ Alfred Tennyson. Canto 56.

⁴ Michael E. Soule, "What is conservation biology?" *BioScience* 35.11 (1985): 727-734.

⁵ Psalm 104:21

To the ecologist, death, disease, and decomposition are not bad. And, what makes creation good, then, is that it is diverse, ordered, and functional. The predator is good. The parasite is good. Decomposition is good. Bacteria are good. Viruses are....good...I guess. (Just because I have to say it, doesn't mean I have to like it.) These all have God-given niches. Now, that doesn't mean that *all* death is good. Untimely death is still bad. Untimely extinction at the hands of humans is bad. And, human suffering is definitely not part of God's good will. But, overall, creaturely death is good because that is part of the ordered ecosystem. This conclusion isn't just the unfortunate byproduct of an evolutionary worldview, though. I do this thought experiment with my students. For the sake of argument, let's imagine a young earth, created in six literal days. On what day were bacteria made? We don't know, but let's say day 6. On what day did sin enter the system through the fall? Again, we don't know, but let's say we didn't even make it a full day past the creation account, so day 8. Let's say God started with just 2 lowly bacteria on day 6. If those 2 bacteria reproduced without death or competition or struggle for life, do you know how many bacteria there are in just 48 hours? Enough to cover the surface of earth in waist-deep layer of bacteria! That's not good. Creaturely death, even death before the fall, is part of God's good creation that keeps the system ordered.

So, when in Romans 8 Paul refers to the groaning of creation, I don't think he's referring to "natural evil" or creaturely death. Yes – the earth is in bondage to decay. But that decay shouldn't be confused with any biological processes, such as decomposition or disease, which are God-created components of a stable, balanced, functional, and ordered ecosystem. *From the moment that creatures were created, death was inherent.* To all animals, including humans, God gave the plants as food. Even for a vegetarian, eating involves death. As an animal, to live is to eat and to eat is to kill. Tofu kills soybeans. Won't someone think of the soybeans?! Death is baked into the very good creation.

Then what did *Paul* mean by "groaning"? I think a clue is in this idea of creation being subjected to futility. "Futility" indicates that creation cannot do what it was created to do. Sin has frustrated creation's telos. So Paul is describing the groaning response of creation to the distorting effects of sin on human's relationship with creation. In other words, when humans don't treat creation the way they're supposed to, creation suffers, groaning in bondage to decay. To better understand how humans are *supposed* to treat creation, though, we need to set aside Paul and return to the Garden, which brings us to Part 2: The Presence

Part 2: The Presence

This is my Father's world:

The birds their carols raise,

The morning light, the lily white,

Declare their Maker's praise.

This is my Father's world:

He shines in all that's fair;

In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,

He speaks to me everywhere.⁶

By Day 6 of the creation account, when creation is declared "very good," the earth is no longer void and formless; rather it's ordered and functional. This is the ecological definition of good: the earth is full of biodiversity; the creatures are functioning in their ecological and evolutionary roles – predator, prey, and parasite. Balanced ecological interactions maintain the finely tuned order of creation. Bacteria are not covering the earth in a knee-deep cesspool of putrescence. In this telling, humans are not the climax of creation.

To find the emphasis, the climax, of the creation account, and the purpose of creation, we need to move to Day 7, when, interestingly, no-thing was made. The climax of creation is actually the *rest* of God. But what is meant

⁶ *This is My Father's World* lyrics by Maltbie Babcock (1901)

by this “rest”? Surely, God isn’t tuckered out and needs a little nap. This isn’t just Biblical justification for vegging out and watching Sunday football all day. Here, I find the work of Old Testament scholar John Walton particularly helpful. Walton argues that the idea of a deity resting would immediately be interpreted by Ancient Near East civilizations with that deity taking up residence in its temple. Walton writes “The seventh day is not a theological appendix to the creation account...it intimates the purpose of creation and of the cosmos. God not only sets up the cosmos so that people will have a place; he also sets up the cosmos to serve as his temple.”⁷ Elsewhere, Walton writes “The role of the temple in the ancient world... is a place for the deity – sacred space. It is his home.”⁸ NT Wright agrees: “The creator’s purpose (was) to fill his world with his glory, to rest and reign within his proper home.”⁹

So, the climax of the creation account is God indwelling his earthly temple home. This view of creation – as God’s home – radically affirms the goodness of creation. And, this interpretation also reveals creation’s telos: the purpose of creation is to serve as God’s cosmic home, the residence of the indwelling and fully present God – God’s earthly temple. I never learned this in Sunday School. Maybe that’s because the view of earth as God’s temple – God’s home – completely undermines the notion of earth being, primarily, for us. This, I think, has far-reaching implications for the development of a theological ecology. (And, this may be a good place to note that the word ecology comes from the Greek “Oikos” which means “home.”) But now we see it’s not just our home, it’s God home. GK Beale develops what he calls a “a biblical theology of the dwelling place of God,”¹⁰ and Beale notes many similarities between Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple. (For instance, the Jewish temple had all sorts of garden art and imagery on its walls, both were on a mountain facing east, the tree-shaped lampstand reflects the tree of life, both were guarded by cherubim, etc.)¹¹ And, when in Genesis 3:8 we read of God “walking back and forth in the garden,” the same Hebrew verbal form is used to describe God’s presence in the tabernacle. When we view Eden as temple, we recognize that this truly is my Father’s World, designed so that we (and all creation!) may hear him pass in the rustling grass.

Now, if Eden was created as God’s earthly temple in which God’s holy presence would reside, and the purpose of creation was to serve as the dwelling place of God, what was the purpose of humans? Beale picks up this question and focuses our attention on the key passage of Genesis 2:15. “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend (*abad*) and keep (*samar*) it.” Beale notes that these two Hebrew words are priestly words. *Abad* and *samar* are he says “Painted with ‘cultic colors...’.”¹² Walton notes that the majority of times that *abad* and *samar* are used together in Scripture, they are referring to the priestly duties in the tabernacle. “The tasks given to Adam [tend and keep] are of a priestly nature – that is, caring for sacred space.”¹³ So, if Eden was the first temple, that makes Adam (and by extension humans) the first priest, put in the temple to tend and keep the functional order.

Next, we can turn to a parallel passage in Genesis 1, where we see the role of humans described in priestly terms. Much ink has been spilled over this idea of “subduing the earth” and “having dominion.” “Dominion” (in Hebrew “*radah*”) has kingly implications. And, there’s much to be said about this, though I won’t have time or space to do that tonight. My colleague Mike Langford tackles this one very well, pointing to Psalm 72 as a proper view of

⁷ John H. Walton. *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*. Zondervan, 2001.

⁸ John H. Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. InterVarsity Press, 2010.

⁹ NT Wright. *History and eschatology: Jesus and the promise of natural theology*. SPCK, 2019.

¹⁰ Gregory K. Beale *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. InterVarsity Press, 2014.

¹¹ Gregory K. Beale. “Adam as the first priest in Eden as the garden temple.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22.2 (2018): 9 -24.

¹² Beale *The Temple and the Church's Mission*

¹³ Walton *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*

king as holy servant rather than king as dominating tyrant. And, there is certainly connection between priestly service and kingly service – the people of God are, in fact, described as a royal priesthood.

But tonight I want to focus on the priestly vocation. Beale looks at this line “fill the earth”¹⁴ and interprets this in light of God’s presence being originally centered in Eden. Beale writes “The presence of God, which was initially to be limited to the garden temple of Eden, was to be extended throughout the whole earth by his image bearers, as they themselves represented and reflected his glorious presence and attributes.”¹⁵ Richard Middleton agrees, writing “Humans are the divinely designated mediators of the creator’s presence...extending the divine presence on earth.”¹⁶ Like tending and keeping, this mediation of God’s presence to creation is a priestly task. The idea of priest as mediator is everywhere in Greek Orthodoxy, and the idea of mediating God’s presence to creation dates back to at least the 7th century with Saint Maximus the Confessor, a name to which we’ll return in a bit.

In developing our theological ecology, we’ve established first and foremost that the purpose of creation is to glorify God, serving as God’s dwelling place. Then, in developing a theological anthropology, we’ve established that humans were commissioned as priests to tend, to keep, and to extend Eden, mediating God’s presence to the wider world – *facilitating the communion of creation with creator*. Orthodox scholars, John Zizioulas and John Chryssavgis (names to which we’ll return) develop this idea of humans as priests of creation. Zizioulas writes that “Man was given the...*imago Dei*, not for himself but for creation.”¹⁷ And Chryssavgis writes that “Priesthood is the royal vocation of all people...(and) the whole world becomes a cathedral”¹⁸ This is a beautiful picture! But, unfortunately, the rest of the story doesn’t go off without a hitch. Before we can address our present-day rites and responsibilities as priests of creation, we must first address a regrettable reality. A long, long time ago in a garden far, far away, we screwed up. Part 3: The Partition.

Part 3: The Partition

Holy, holy, holy!

Though the darkness hide Thee,

Though the eye of sinful man

Thy glory may not see;

Only thou art holy,

there is none beside thee,

*perfect in power in love and purity*¹⁹

At the risk of stating the obvious: God is holy, and God won’t abide evil. Adam, the first priest, was commissioned to usher God’s holy presence to the wider world, to extend Eden. But Adam failed. Rather than manifesting God’s image outward, so that all creation could enjoy God’s unrestricted presence, Adam let sin inward, contaminating the Garden. The consequences of sin were swift and drastic. Adam and Eve were excommunicated, banned from ever again sharing in the presence of God, as God walked back and forth through the Garden in the cool of the day.

¹⁴ Genesis 1:28

¹⁵ Beale. *The Temple and Church’s Mission*

¹⁶ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*. Baker Academic, 2014.

¹⁷ John D. Zizioulas "Preserving God’s creation: three lectures on theology and ecology." *King’s Theological Review* 12.2 (1989): 41-45.

¹⁸ Chryssavgis, John. "A new heaven and a new Earth: Orthodox Christian insights from theology, spirituality, and the sacraments" in John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (eds) *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*. Fordham University Press, 2013.

¹⁹ *Holy, Holy, Holy* lyrics by Reginald Heber (1826)

This sin of the first priest had grave consequences not just for humanity but for all of creation. As John Zizioulas writes, “Here lies for theology the root of the ecological problem...the human being rejected his role as the priest of creation by making himself God in creation.”²⁰

This is what is typically referred to as “The Fall” or “Original sin.” And, to understand the cosmic consequences of the Fall, it may be helpful to contrast a couple different views of the Fall. Much of the western church teaches a model of the Fall that traces back to the writings of Augustine. In this model, human sin resulted in the loss of human innocence. Humans became guilty of sin, and this guilt was transmitted from generation to generation so that all humans were born guilty of Adam’s sin. This is, essentially, a genetic model of the Fall, and guilt transmits like a bad gene from parent to offspring. And, the effects of the fall are understood primarily in terms of humans. Humans have lost their innocence. Humans are born sinful. Humans need salvation.

Orthodox scholar Eve Tibbs, though, writes that “perhaps the deepest and widest chasm between Eastern Orthodox theology and Western Christian theology is seen in their respective views of the Fall.”²¹ Tibbs describes Orthodox theology interpreting the Fall based on an Irenaeus model. In Irenaeus’ thought, what was lost was not innocence but communion. Because a severing of relationship, an interaction, between the creation and the creator is central to this model, we can think of it as an ecological model of the Fall, in contrast to Augustine’s genetic model.

According to Tibbs, “In the Orthodox view of the ancestral sin, our ancestors’ willful separation from the God of life separated all creation from the source of life itself. Consequently, communion with the creator has been lost, and all creation has become subject to destructive enemies: death, decay, and evil.”²² Sin created a partition that separated creation from the creator. Communion was replaced with separation. In this Eastern interpretation of the fall, we see that the consequences of sin extend far beyond human guilt. *All* creation groans because of its separation from the indwelling, divine presence of God.

Richard Middleton agrees, saying sin has “shut earth off from God’s full presence.”²³ This separation is deadly serious. As Irenaeus says: “Separation from God is death.”²⁴ And, because of humans’ sin, this is the fallen state in which creation finds itself.

Like Irenaeus, Zizioulas also relates this cosmic separation to death. He argues that creation out of nothing – *ex nihilo* – indicates that creation is finite. If it had a beginning, it also has end. The only way, therefore, that finite creation can be saved is through linkage, or communion, with the infinite creator.²⁵ Communion, then, is cosmic salvation and separation is cosmic death. *This is why creation groans in futility. Sin has undermined creation’s ability to serve as God’s dwelling and to enjoy God’s presence. The cosmos has been partitioned from its source of life and is, thus, in bondage to decay.*

“Holy, holy, holy – though the darkness hides thee.” Things are looking pretty dark. Humans sinned. God’s goal of communion with creation is spoiled. Separation brings death. It’s bad. Fortunately, though, God is not done.

²⁰ John Zizioulas. “Proprietors or priests of creation?.” *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*. Fordham University Press, 2013.

²¹ Eve Tibbs. *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology: Introducing Beliefs and Practices*. Baker Academic, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ Middleton *A New Heaven a New Earth*

²⁴ Irenaeus *Against Heresies*

²⁵ John Zizioulas “Creation Theology: An Orthodox Perspective” in J. Chryssavgis and N. Asproulis (eds) *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*. T&T Clark, 2021. See also A. Shepherd. 2007. “The ‘Other’, the ‘Gift’, and ‘Priesthood’: Zizioulas’ Eucharistic and eschatological theology of creation.” *Stimulus* 15(4):3-8.

No partition can forever separate God from his beloved creation. “For God so loved the world...”²⁶ Cue Part 4: The Priests.

Part 4: The Priests

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty the King of creation!
O my soul praise him for he is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near;
Join me in glad adoration!*²⁷

So far in our development of a theological ecology, we have noted that death and decay have always been a part of the created order. The universe was created finite. The intent of God was to rest and dwell incarnate within his cosmic temple. So long as the creation was in communion with the eternal and life-giving God, decay to oblivion was impossible. Humans, as God’s image bearers, were commissioned to extend Eden and spread God’s presence throughout creation, ushering out life. But, the original priests failed, and all creation was separated from God’s presence, ushering in death. Creation, intended as God’s dwelling place, groans in futility, because it cannot of its own accord fulfill its mission to praise the indwelling God. With me so far?

At this point, it’s probably appropriate to pause and address a potential objection. On one hand, I’ve been talking about God’s presence being partitioned, separated from creation. On the other hand, we regularly speak of God’s omnipresence: God is everywhere. God is in this room. How can God be everywhere *and* be separated from creation? Well, it’s complicated. Haha! But, we know that God’s presence manifests in different ways.

God’s presence now doesn’t seem to equate with God’s presence “walking back and forth through the garden.” And, God’s omnipresence seems different from God’s glory presence in the Holy of Holies, and it certainly seems different from the picture of God’s presence in the New Jerusalem. Eastern Orthodoxy talks of God’s essence being transcendent, but God’s energies being immanent throughout creation. To be clear, the fall has not changed this immanence or this omnipresence. But, for creation to truly live, God’s *indwelling presence* needs to be restored.

There’s a post-Biblical Jewish term that might be particularly helpful here: *shekinah*, which refers to God’s “glory presence.” *Shekinah* is actually a mash up of 2 Jewish words: *shakan* (to dwell) and *mishkan* (dwelling place),²⁸ indicating God’s intense, indwelling presence in the tabernacle. So, we could think of cosmic redemption as the realization of cosmic *shekinah*. If the problem is that creation has been separated from the indwelling presence of God, redemption can be thought of as the restoration of the indwelling presence of God – God coming back into his earthly temple. Cosmic redemption means restoring the presence of God on earth, as it is in heaven. And, I think, the rest of the scriptural story, from Genesis to Revelation, can be thought of as God restoring his indwelling presence; God coming back to his earthy home, consummating the I Corinthians promise that God will be all in all.²⁹

The cosmic redemption story picks back up after Eden, when God selects a people and a place, Israel, in which his presence would dwell. An opening act of God’s homecoming story is found in Genesis 28, the famous story of Jacob’s ladder. With all due respect to Led Zeppelin, this is not a stairway *to* heaven, it is a stairway *from* heaven. This is a picture of the heavenly God punching through the partition of sin and coming back to his home

²⁶ John 3:16

²⁷ *Praise to the Lord! the Almighty, the King of Creation!* Lyrics by Joachim Neander (1680), translated by Catherine Winkworth (1863)

²⁸ <https://jrichardmiddleton.com/> (accessed 12/28/2021).

²⁹ I Corinthians 15:28

on earth. Should we miss that point Jacob is sure to emphasize “How awesome is this place! This is none other than *the house of God*, and this is the gate of heaven!”³⁰ Then, just in case you missed it, Jacob goes on to name that place “Bethel,” which means...anyone?...“house of God.” At Bethel, God announces his homecoming plan, aka *The Return of the King*. Steward of Gondor be warned!

Remember, our story started way back in Edenic paradise, which on Day 7, God indwelled. But sin screwed that up, replacing communion with separation. God’s will won’t ultimately be frustrated, though, so God established a people and a place wherein he would dwell – re-establishing sacred space within creation – which brings us to the story of Israel’s tabernacle, and later the temple. According to 1 Chronicles, we see “The glory of the Lord filled the temple of God. Then Solomon said, ‘The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; but I have built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever.’”³¹ Solomon’s time horizon was a little overly optimistic, but the point remains: God punched through the partition of sin, and God made his home in Israel, indwelling the tabernacle and later the temple.

Now, with New Covenant clarity, we see that the temple was only temporary. Plot twist! The temple built by human hands pointed to a greater reality: Emmanuel. As John tells us “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”³² In Jesus, the New Covenant is inaugurated. And, it’s important to notice here a theme that is emphasized particularly well in Eastern Orthodoxy: it’s not just the death and resurrection of Jesus that’s important – the incarnation is super important as well. Jesus’s life is not just a necessary first step to his death. By indwelling the cosmos, and taking the form of a creature, Jesus, the great high priest, reunited the creation with the creator. So, Jesus is not just the sacrificial lamb: Jesus *is* the temple (the place of God’s presence) and Jesus *is* the priest (the mediator of God’s presence).³³

Jesus’s life on earth lasted only a few short decades, but (in perhaps the greatest understatement of all time), it shook things up just a little bit, especially regarding the idea of restoring God’s indwelling presence on earth. Jesus introduced the New Covenant, ending the temple era with an emphatic table flip! As we see at Pentecost, God was no longer planning to indwell a temple made by human hands, but God the Holy Spirit indwelt his people. Didn’t see that coming!

As Paul writes in I Corinthians “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.”³⁴ And Peter tells us “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.”³⁵ Now, with Christ as our model, we are both the dwelling place of God and the priestly mediators of God’s presence to the whole world! *Indwelt by God, we are priests of creation.*

The idea of humans as priests of creation dates back to 7th century patristic saint, Maximus the Confessor, who described the priestly vocation of humans as microcosms and mediators. And who, it must be said, has hands down, the best name of any patriarch: Maximus the Confessor. So cool! Microcosm refers to our unique position within creation as both material and spiritual. Then, because we are both material and spiritual, we can link the material finite creation with the divine infinite creator. According to Maximus, as priests of creation, our mission field is not just other humans – it’s all creation!

³⁰ Genesis 28:17

³¹ I Chronicles 5:14 – 6:2.

³² John 1:14

³³ This is a major theme of *Hebrews*

³⁴ I Corinthians 6:14

³⁵ I Peter 2:5

Linking creation with creator is realized, then, through the priestly, eucharistic act of elevation (*anaphora*). (You thought we were done with fancy words after *abad* and *samar*, but now I'm going Greek on ya! Watch out!) Anyway, just as the priest of the eucharist lifts the created elements of bread and wine to God in communion and for blessing, we as priests of creation lift creation to God in communion and for blessing, referring God's creation back to God.

As Zizioulas writes "This act of elevation – namely, the referral of creation to its Creator – is the essence of our priesthood."³⁶ Consciously or not, many of us use similar language in our prayers. For instance, we may "lift up" friends and family for prayer. "Lord, we lift up the midlife crisis of Aunt Deloris," but why not also lift up the wildlife crisis of the Amazon Forest? (see what I did there?). Now hear my next point here, this is important. If we do lift up the forest for blessing and healing, we don't just lift it up because the local people need the forest's resources to survive, which they do. And we don't just lift up the forest because the forest's flora may contain the next big anti-cancer medication for us, which it very well might. And we don't just lift up the forest because it scrubs our dirty carbon, which it certain does. The priest of creation lifts up the forest to God for blessing because it is good and because it is groaning, and because it is God's.

Kallistos Ware tells us that when we elevate creation and refer it to God, humans act as "the bond and bridge of God's creation. Uniting earth and heaven, making earth heavenly and heaven earthly."³⁷ By lifting the forest, we give voice to the voiceless. St. Ignatius calls this liturgy "a medicine of immortality." And John Chryssavgis tells us that "In nature, survival and salvation coincide."³⁸ Be the Lorax – speak for the trees. This is what I mean when I talk about the priestly relationship between humans and the rest of creation being synanthropic. In this Eucharistic vision of the world, Creation flourishes because we link it with the creator. Without this link, creation dies.

OK, so let's redraw our triangle, but sub in our fancy theological words (2 Hebrew and 1 Greek, if you're keeping tabs): *abad*, *samar*, and *anaphora*. And, let's flesh out what these priestly words might mean for us, today, in more practical terms because so far it's been pretty abstract.

First *abad*, which we have translated as till/tend. This, I think, is our proactive work in creation. From planting a garden to managing a national forest. This is the work of conservation, where we work to maintain and promote creation's biodiversity. This is where we chew on the tough questions of balancing the needs of people with the needs of the planet. In so doing, though, the conservation biologist recognizes first and foremost the intrinsic value of creation. Biodiversity is good.

We translated *samar* as guarding and keeping. If tilling and tending is our proactive work, then guarding and keeping is our protective work. This is the act of preservation, preached so effectively by John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson, among others. If conservation seeks to balance the needs of people with the needs of the land, preservation emphasizes that rule number one, is do no harm and prevent untimely extinction. Preservation recognizes not just the intrinsic value of creation, but also its interactive, ecological value. Here, creation is not just good, it is good because it is ordered, and every member of the organization contributes to the overall goodness. Any of my ecology students could have told you that there is no way I'd get through this lecture without quoting Aldo Leopold, so here goes: in affirming ecological value, Leopold writes: "If the land

³⁶ John Zizioulas "Orthodoxy and the Ecological Crisis" in J. Chryssavgis and N. Asproulis (eds) *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*. T&T Clark, 2021.

³⁷ Kallistos Ware "Through Creation to Creator" in John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (eds) *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*. Fordham University Press, 2013.

³⁸ John Chryssavgis. The Green Patriarch - Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology

mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not...To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.”³⁹ Keeping every cog and wheel is *samar*.

Now the work of conservation and preservation is difficult, and often involves making difficult decisions and tradeoffs. This, then, is where the sciences come in. The natural sciences investigate how creation works. And, knowledge of the functioning of creation certainly contributes to our goal of keeping creation functional! But, it’s not just natural sciences – the social sciences are critical as we weigh these decisions and tradeoffs. Economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, history, and others need to contribute to this discussion of how best to tend and keep the earth.

If *abad* and *samar* involve proactive and protective priestly work, then *anaphora* – elevation – can be viewed as our consecrative work. If *abad* is conservation and *samar* is preservation, then *anaphora* is mediation, bridging the material with the spiritual. Here we don’t just affirm the intrinsic and ecological value of creation, we also affirm creation’s doxological value. It is good because it praises God. It is good because it is sacred.

In this way, just as we can *abad* and *samar* through the sciences, we “*anaphora*” through the arts and humanities. (Sorry, Owen, I’m sure I didn’t conjugate *anaphora* right there. Work with me – I’m just an ecologist.) Anyway, Chrysavgis, nicely links art, nature, and priesthood by asking us to see “nature as a divinely written icon...in doing so, we serve as a priesthood of creation, fulfilling the task to which we were created.”⁴⁰ Through the arts and humanities, we can recognize creation as sacred and give creation a voice to praise its creator.

Art as *anaphora* – lifting up and referring creation to its creator – is not mere metaphor. Any artists in the house? Listen up – you’re about to get a major shout out from this scientist. For Zizioulas, the acts of creating and offering back are the hallmark of priesthood, and it’s the artists, the makers, that exemplify this best. He writes “Through creating we can refashion (creation) in order to bring it into communion with God...We liberate it from (decay) and become its priest, offering it to its God and savior and giving eternal meaning to things otherwise subject to decay and the passage of time.”⁴¹ Art gives creation eternal meaning, consecrating creation and elevating creation beyond the finite confines of decay.

I said I wanted to make this part more concrete, so perhaps an example or two of art as *anaphora* would be useful. I think this gathering, elevating, and offering of creation is described perfectly by Makoto Fujimura, whose painting *Walking on Water* I’ve featured as the wallpaper for my title slides. Mako uses precious and intentionally prepared materials in art that he calls an “ecosystem... an integrated way of making that affirms the beauty of nature.”⁴² Mako identifies the artist as co-creator with God, writing that “this human act (of making art) is connected to the diving presence. Simply put, when we make art, God shows up.”⁴³

Maybe a more local example of this eucharistic view of art would be helpful. In *Touching this Leviathan*, our own Peter Moe asks us to contemplate the utter incomprehensibility of the whale.⁴⁴ Peter’s book is not dry science - it is poetic and wonderful. Peter, as poet and priest, lifts up the whale (no easy task, by the way – lifting up a whale), but Priest Peter, with Atlas-like strength, lifts up the whale in respect and awe as paragon of mystery

³⁹ Aldo Leopold *Round River*. Oxford University Press, 1972.

⁴⁰ Chrysavgis "A new heaven and a new Earth"

⁴¹ John Zizioulas "Creation Theology: An Orthodox Response" in J. Chrysavgis and N. Asproulis (eds) *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*. T&T Clark, 2021.

⁴² Makoto Fujimura *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*. Yale University Press, 2020.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Peter W. Moe *Touching this Leviathan*. Oregon State University Press, 2021.

and wonder, asking not “what are whales good for” but rather, reverentially referring leviathan back to its maker.

Although I somewhat artificially divided these three priestly tasks between art and science, there is obviously overlap – for instance, for creatures to praise God, they must first be preserved. Here I think a helpful analogy is of creation as a choir singing God’s praises. If we, then, are the choir directors, our first rule should be to make sure everyone in the choir has a voice. How can the choir of creation sing God’s praise if we’ve shot the altos and cut down all the tenors? Yes, keeping every cog and wheel is the first rule, but tending and keeping a beautiful (and doxological!) flower garden is as much art as science. To be priests of creation, we need the arts *and* sciences. This, by the way, is why creation is cheering the Christian liberal arts! (And, it should be noted, this is why Christian liberal arts schools should be at the forefront of conservation, preservation, and the arts. Can I get an “Amen” from the people?!)

Creation is groaning for the glorious indwelling presence of God, but sin has partitioned creation from creator. As priests of creation, though, we can link creation to the light and life of God. To tend, to keep, and to elevate. To serve and preserve. To contemplate and consecrate. Declaring to creation “All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near!” This is the holy work of the scientist and the artist; the physicist and philosopher, ecologist and economist, painter and poet – the priests of creation. As the modern ecological crisis shows, though, we have not yet arrived in paradise. You may have noticed the blank spot at the bottom of my chiasm of cosmic redemption. Although the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus introduced the New Covenant, we are not yet in the New Jerusalem. But, there is hope. For a sneak peak of creation’s consummation, we now turn to Part 5, which is also, conveniently, the consummation of this lecture.

Part 5: The Perfection

*All thy works with joy surround thee; earth and heaven reflect thy rays;
Stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea.
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in thee*

At this point, we have established that the finite created order, made *ex nihilo*, is in bondage to decay dependent on humans to fulfill their calling as priestly image-bearers: tending, keeping, and lifting up creation, linking the material with the divine. In the words of NT Wright, “this is the future creation groans for.”⁴⁵ Wright goes on to say that “The presence of the spirit within Jesus’s people is the sign and guarantee of the same renewing presence within the whole of creation.”⁴⁶ The picture here is one of perfect cosmic redemption, an eschatological paradise wherein Psalm 72 is realized such that “whole earth will be filled with his glory.”⁴⁷ In short, God will indwell not just his people but his entire creation. *En route* to this glorious consummation, though, we need to clean up two points of pervasively bad theology that undermine our priestly calling.

First, God’s salvation is not limited to humans. Too often, the church’s work is defined as “saving souls.” Redemption and renewal are not limited to humans; they are holistic and cosmic in scope. This message is everywhere in Scripture. For God so loved the *world*. As Wesleyan scholar Howard Snyder writes in his excellent book *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, the hope of Romans 8:20 “is the hope of creation healed, the marriage of earth and heaven.”⁴⁸ The Orthodox refer to this marriage of heaven and earth as *theosis*, the consummation

⁴⁵ Wright *History and Eschatology*

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Psalm 72:19

⁴⁸ Howard Snyder. *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven*. Cascade Books, 2011.

of creation through communion with the creator. So, salvation is not just about saving souls. It is about God saving the entire created order. Seriously, read Howard Snyder's book. It's awesome. And, while you're at it, read some Greek Orthodox theology. It's awesome, too.

The second point of bad theology that undermines the importance of our priestly task is the misperception of where we spend eternity. After death, where will you live forever? Spoiler: it is not away from earth "in heaven." In the last days, we do not evacuate an obliterated earth to be with God forever in heaven. We do not "fly away" to heaven. Nor, does God "call us home" to heaven. Professor Richard Middleton offers cash rewards to any student that can find a single, clear New Testament reference to Christians living forever in heaven or that heaven is the final home of believers.⁴⁹ Heaven apart from earth is not our final home. True, our home is with God, but our home (and God's future temple) is on earth. The earth is where the bodily resurrected faithful spend eternity with God, in creation. I'm not sure where the picture of us as disembodied souls strumming harps on poofy clouds came from, but it's not from the Bible. Although Revelation isn't perfectly clear about a lot of things, this seems pretty evident. "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them."⁵⁰

In God's good future, the earth is redeemed and renewed by the restored presence of God. We don't fly away, and the earth doesn't get annihilated in a ball of flames. No, heaven comes down to earth. In shock, John declares that in new Jerusalem there is no temple! The whole earth is God's consummated temple. God dwells with us. God's *shekinah* permeates the earth "as the waters cover the sea."⁵¹ This is the picture of the great perfection. There is no partition; there is only perfect shalom throughout the entire created order.

These correctives are important because it means that our priestly work today matters – our tending and keeping and lifting up. Our writing and painting. Our science and architecture. Our gardening and beautifying. As Fujimura writes, "What we build, design, and depict on this side of eternity matters, because in some mysterious way, those creations will become part of the future city of God."⁵² Similarly, NT Wright tells us ""what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world...I don't know what musical instruments we shall have to play Bach in God's new world, though I'm sure Bach's music will be there."⁵³

In God's perfect future, the dwelling of God will be with his priests and all God's creatures; the temple curtain is not just torn, it is gone. As promised in Revelation 22, we along with all creation will finally see our creator face to face, enjoying God's presence as God finally indwells his creation. "All thy works with joy surround thee...center of unbroken praise!"

Conclusion

In this talk, I have argued that what is wrong with creation is not the God-ordained ecological interactions that give order to the system. No, creation groans because human sin has partitioned the cosmos from its life-giving source. Humans, created to be links between the material and spiritual, have failed at their priestly commission. This link, though, can be re-established – thank God! Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, creation's great high priest, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit within God's people, we can recover

⁴⁹ Middleton *A New Heaven and a New Earth*.

⁵⁰ Revelation 21:2-3

⁵¹ Habakkuk 2:14

⁵² Fujimura *Art and Faith*

⁵³ N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. Zondervan, 2008.

our priestly ethos to tend, to keep, and to lift-up creation in preparation for the glorious return of Christ to his earthly temple. It is not too late.

My goal tonight was not to give you the top ten ways you can green your life. There are lots of good places you can look that up, if you're so inclined. The problem is, not enough Christians are inclined. My goal tonight was not so much to develop an ecological ethic but an ecological ethos. Might attitudes and behaviors among believers change if we started teaching, and preaching, and believing that earth is God's temple – God's home? And we are the temple priests.

What would it mean for ecological relationships today if we viewed the earth not as our pantry but as God's parlor, if we viewed creatures not as consumables to sate our pleasures but as choir members to sing God's praises. Restoration could occur even now if, in giving voice to the voiceless, we lifted up not just the widow and orphan but also the willow and orca. Revelation has given us a vision of what God's perfect future looks like. When Christ descends, will he see the ocean as his reflecting pool or our refuse pile? Will the returning king be greeted by streets of gold or grime? A crystal sea or a crappy sea?

Priests of creation view mountains as monuments, islands as icons, wildlife as worshippers, timber as temple - conserving and consecrating God's good creation. This is the priestly ethos. This is the hope of a creation in bondage to decay. In tending and keeping and lifting up creation, we link creation to creator. As priests of a groaning creation, these are our priestly tasks. It is not too late, but we must not fail again. Thank you.