

AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD: REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGY OF CREATION

Barbara R. Rossing

The sacredness and goodness of creation is a conviction affirmed in Scripture and in core Lutheran theological principles.

The poetic refrain “God saw that it was good” anchors the creation story in Genesis 1. Repeated six times, with variation, the refrain culminates in the declaration of “very good” on the sixth day (Gen 1:31). The Hebrew conjunction *ki* can also be translated adverbially as “how”: “God saw *how* (*ki*) good it was” (Common English Bible). “How good” evokes God’s delight in discovering each element of the world as good. God finds joy in creation.

“Good” is the key word—the goodness of all, as God looks at each aspect of the world. *Tov* in Hebrew expresses joy and relationship, as well as beauty. One rabbinic commentary translates *tov* as “beautiful.”¹

Genesis 1 is liturgical poetry, showing us the beauty of each element of creation. Sun, earth, atmosphere (“firmament”), oceans and all biological organisms, including humans and all species of plants and animals: each has its own ecological niche, and each is declared beautiful and good in the eyes of God.

SEEING THE EARTH

God’s first response—seeing—can also serve as a starting point for us today. Genesis 1 situates humans within the enormity of the whole cosmos. Thanks to photos of the earth from space, we are now able to see the earth as never

¹ Ellen Bernstein, “Creation Theology: A Jewish Perspective,” in *The Green Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 1–53.

before. The 1972 iconic image of the earth taken by the crew of the US Apollo spacecraft, the most widely distributed photograph of all times, reveals the beauty of the earth as a blue marbled planet, with living oceans and continents. We can see what the astronauts saw: the earth's sheer beauty, its vulnerability, as well as a new sense of humanity's place on the planet, all suffused with an overwhelming sense of awe. Astronaut Michael Collins describes it:

I remember so vividly what I saw when I looked back at my fragile home—a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity. Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that *must* endure.²

As astronaut Bill Anders said about circumnavigating the moon in 1968, “We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the earth.”

Seeing the earth today means opening our eyes to see its beauty and also its vulnerability—the devastation humans are causing to God's good creation. Astronauts record their shock in seeing changes to the earth such as the diminution of the polar ice cap. Commander Ellen Collins, the first woman to lead a US space shuttle mission, told how she saw the island of Madagascar: “We saw deforestation [...]. The rivers and streams that normally would be a bluish-gray color are now brown from the erosion of soil flowing into the ocean.”³

The thinness and vulnerability of the earth's atmosphere relative to the rest of the planet is also something astronauts see. From space, the earth's atmosphere looks like a “thin blue line”—thinner than the peel of an apple relative to the apple. Genesis describes this protective layer as a “firmament.”

Carbon dioxide itself is colorless, so the build-up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere cannot be seen directly from space. What can be seen are the effects of increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide on the planet—the drying up of large lakes such as Lake Chad in Africa; catastrophic flooding in Asia; deforestation in the Amazon and Congo River basins; shrinking glaciers in the world's mountain ranges; smoke from unprecedented wildfires; and dustbowls caused by drought. Too much heat from greenhouse gases (primarily carbon dioxide) is killing ecological systems humans need for our survival.

² Michael Collins, “Foreword,” in Roy A. Gallant, *Our Universe* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1980), 6.

³ Cited in Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 57.

GOOD, VERY GOOD

God sees each creature as “good.” By calling each creature good, God initiates an ongoing relationship of love with the earth and with each of its creatures. God “is *affected* by what is seen.”⁴ As Norman Habel notes, a similar exclamation of “good” is used to describe the response of Moses’ mother when the child is born. Moses’ mother “sees he is good” (Ex 2:1). Similarly, in Genesis 1, “God beholds Earth emerge from the waters below and ‘sees it is good.’”⁵ Earth is God’s living child.

For God, earth’s ongoing creative ability—the process evolutionary biologists describe as its capacity for bringing forth new species—is “good.” With amazing scientific insight, Genesis describes earth as a partner with God in creating more life forms. Written before our scientific worldview, Genesis differs from our modern cosmology. Still, its appreciation of earth’s ongoing creativity coheres with our understanding of the biological processes of evolution and speciation. Beginning with the creation of plants on the third day, the earth itself becomes a cocreator with God, bringing forth creatures of its own—“The earth brought forth vegetation” (Gen 1:12). This is repeated on the sixth day with the emergence of animals, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind” (Gen 1:24). Creation is a process from below, in which creatures also become cocreators, bringing forth more and more creatures of their own in the bounty of life and creation. God calls this entire process good.

What does the goodness or beauty of creation mean for us today? It can mean a number of things. The creatures are good as food for people to eat, as Martin Luther emphasizes in his commentary on Genesis. God’s feeding of hungry people with the good gifts of creation becomes increasingly important in an age of hunger.

Utility for humans is not the primary meaning of “good,” however. “Good for humans” is not what God says. This is important because stripping the earth’s resources through extractive mining, drilling, agriculture and industry has been justified on the grounds that God gave humans “dominion” over creation in Genesis 1:26. But if we look closely at each day’s creation, we see that God declares the creatures as good for their own sake, quite apart from any usefulness to humans. This is a perspective shared by God’s speech from the whirlwind in Job 38–41.

⁴ Terrence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 40.

⁵ Norman Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1-11* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 42.

Perhaps most importantly, goodness also means interconnectedness, an ecological principle. God declares the entirety of creation to be “very good” (*tov ma’ov*, Gen 1:31). This superlative on the sixth day is not reserved for humans alone, as some anthropocentric interpretations have claimed. Rather, it is when God saw everything, and how the whole creation works together as an interconnected living ecological system, that God declares everything to be very, very good.

GOOD AS COMMON GOOD

The goodness or “good” of creation poses ethical questions for us today.

A “good” can become a noun, indicating one’s own private property or possessions—“my goods,” in English, similar to the Greek *ta agatha*. Jesus’ story about the man who builds bigger barns in order to hold all his “goods” (Lk 12:18, 19) contains an urgent warning about the perils of hoarding goods for one’s own exclusive gain. In his warped vision, the man thinks he himself has produced his own goods. He fails to realize that it is the earth that brought forth his abundant crops. The man loses his soul. Martin Luther labels this hoarder “Mammon.”⁶

If “good” is understood primarily in terms of private gain, without considering the consequences for our neighbor, for future generations or for ecosystems, we are all imperiled. God calls us to see the goodness of creation by valuing inter-relationships most of all.

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 comes at an urgent moment for creation. It is time for a new reformation, ethicist Larry Rasmussen and other theologians argue: What we need is an ecological reformation that turns the church towards earth-healing and the common good.⁷ In laying out the contours of what an eco-Reformation might look like, Rasmussen underscores the need for an economy that fosters the common good, so that “the primary goods of the commons—earth, air, fire, water, light—are cared-for requisites of a shared good, a good for both present and future generations of humankind and otherkind.”⁸

We live at a moment when goods are commodified, but nature and the atmosphere are still too often treated as a sewer or as a resource with no

⁶ Margot Kassmann, “Covenant, Praise and Justice in Creation: Five Bible Studies,” in David G. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva/Maryknoll: WCC/Orbis, 1994), 42.

⁷ Larry Rasmussen, “Waiting for the Lutherans,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010), 86–98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78

value or price. Most countries of the world have not yet put a price on carbon dioxide pollution. Industries are allowed to burn fossil fuels without paying for the consequences of their pollution. Poor people's livelihood is threatened by unsustainable development. The Bible teaches a political economy of "enough for all," based on sharing of what is given for the common good of all (Ex 16). Love for neighbor, including future generations as our neighbor, is at the heart of both the Bible and Lutheran theology.

LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF CREATION AND THE CROSS

God's grace is not for sale, Martin Luther insisted five hundred years ago. Luther's bold economic critique called for reform not only in the church but also in the debt structure of society that was impoverishing people.⁹ Today, we can extend Luther's reformation insight about the pricelessness of grace and life itself into other realms, including creation itself. Creation and future generations are my neighbor, whom I am commanded to love. They are not for sale.

We can draw on incarnational and sacramental theology that discerns God in all of life. In his writings on the Lord's Supper against the Calvinists, Luther insisted that the finite can really hold the infinite: *finitum capax infiniti*. "Deep incarnation" is a phrase coined by the Danish Lutheran Nils Gregerson to express the idea of the radical incarnation of God in all matter. Incarnational and sacramental theology insists that God is present, as Luther says, "in every little seed, whole and entire [...] Christ is present in all creatures, and I might find [Christ] in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for [Christ] is there."¹⁰ Rasmussen and others call this Luther's "joyous panentheism." Today, even as creation is degraded, we can embrace Luther's joyous insistence that God is present

in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.¹¹

⁹ Guillermo Hansen, "Money, Religion, and Tyranny: God and the Demonic in Luther's Antifragile Theology," in Wanda Deifelt (ed.), *Market and Margins: Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2014), 31–68.

¹⁰ Cited by Larry Rasmussen, op. cit. (note 7).

¹¹ Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, 1527," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 58.

The Lutheran theology of the cross—the insistence that God is present also and even most of all in brokenness and pain—can also help us to face the sin of ecological devastation, the injustice of the effects of climate change on the poorest of the poor—and to formulate an analysis of both sin and redemption capable of addressing the ecological crisis.¹²

Indigenous communities' spiritual perspectives can also help us to recover an emphasis on the goodness of creation. Sami Lutheran theologian Tore Johnson underscores the communal nature of creation, in which all living beings are seen as interrelated in a circle of life. "Sami tradition reflects the idea that creation has a voice that should be listened to."¹³ Johnson calls for an eco-theological starting point that begins with creation, doing "theology from the circle of life."¹⁴

ARE FOSSIL FUELS "GOOD"? ENERGY AND THE COMMON GOOD

In order theologically to address the climate crisis we must also address the question of the goodness and risks of fossil fuels, as part of God's creation. Energy poses a problem of competing goods. God's first act of creation in Genesis 1 is light, the energy that powers our life. The sun's light provides energy in abundance to sustain everything on earth. Each hour of every day the sun delivers more energy to earth than humans consume in an entire year.¹⁵ Humans have recently discovered how to tap into ancient sunlight—by burning solar energy banked deep within the earth in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas, buried for millions of years beneath the earth's surface.

Energy is essential for human flourishing. But how do we balance the need for the development of cheap fossil fuels with the risks of carbon dioxide pollution? Climate scientists note that we need to leave three-fourths of known petroleum resources in the ground, in order to stave off dangerous changes to the planet. Commitment to the common good, to future generations, necessitates transitioning away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy.

¹² Wanda Deifelt, "From Cross to Tree of Life: Creation as God's Mask," in Karla Bombach and Shauna Hannan (eds), *Eco-Lutheranism: Lutheran Perspectives on Ecology* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013), 169–76.

¹³ Tore Johnson, "Listen to the Voice of Nature: Indigenous Perspectives," in Karen Bloomquist (ed.), *God, Creation and Climate Change: Spiritual and Ethical Perspectives*, LWF Studies 02/09 (Minneapolis/Geneva: Lutheran University Press/The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106

¹⁵ James B. Martin-Schramm, *Climate Justice. Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 3.

Bishop Mark Narum of North Dakota, suggests that Luther’s catechism question, What does this mean? is a question we might ask also about energy policy. Many residents of the Western North Dakota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), where Bishop Narum serves, have benefited from an enormous oil shale boom, made possible by the development of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling technology. Bishop Narum underscores the good that oil has brought to land owners and to the region’s employment. Oil poses complex pastoral issues in congregations, requiring listening to diverse views. Narum asks, “If God is creator of all and God says, ‘It is good,’ what about petroleum?”¹⁶

As part of God’s good creation, petroleum is certainly “good.” But does that mean we should extract and burn it all as fossil fuel? Or today, might petroleum perform an even greater “good” when left in the ground? Perhaps God has safely sequestered carbon in the sedimentary rock layers, over millions of years, in order to keep the earth’s atmosphere’s temperature at the ideal level for life. Whereas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the “good” of oil-rich rock formations was seen as the energy they provided humans to fuel our economic growth, they may now have an even greater good as a storehouse for sequestered carbon in the ground.

God’s love for creation in Genesis 1 invites us to explore complex ethical questions, to listen to one another, and to take bold, prophetic action to care for the whole of creation as our neighbor. Creation is endangered by human sin, as the astronauts are seeing. “How good!” expresses God’s love for each element of creation. That love that sees the earth in all its brokenness and beauty is the same love that compels us to act today. Luther’s vision of deep incarnation calls us to care for the earth and all its communities of life.

QUESTIONS

What does it mean to say that God’s creation is “good, very good” in an age when everything is for sale? Is anything priceless?

What steps of eco-Reformation might be needed and are possible in your church context?

Do we need to put a price on the creation, on ecosystems, in order to value them?

¹⁶ Mark Narum, “Prairie, Petroleum, Pondering: What Does this Mean?” in Bombach and Hannan, *op. cit.* (note 12), 150.