

# Creation Emerging: Tending the Garden

From the Eastertide series: Credo

*Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, 31; John 1:1-5 Text: Genesis 1:1, 31; John 1:3*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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In the wake of Easter, the disciples found that the crucified was with them still and the overwhelming sense of the presence of Jesus, the spirit of Jesus, convinced them that what he stood for, what he embodied, what he was, could never die, could never be destroyed, and so in the wake of Easter, it is that the Christian tradition arose. *Credo*, I believe. *Credo*, in the Greek and Latin language, the verb and the subject being expressed in that particular form, I believe. Not that I believe this, that and the other thing, but I believe in *God*. I believe in that which was embodied in Jesus. I believe in that which I experienced in Jesus as being ultimately true. *Credo*. I believe in God.

What God?

Well, the God of Israel, of course, the one eternal and true God, the God who created heaven and earth.

What God?

Well, the God we have seen in the face of Jesus, the God with a nature and character that came to expression in Jesus, the word made flesh.

What God?

Well, the God that we sense present with us still, present in the spirit, the spirit of Jesus, the God who gives us the burning heart still in conversation, in community, in the breaking of bread.

*Credo*. I believe, I trust. Not I believe a lot of things, but I trust in that God as the bedrock of my life, the source and ground of all being, believe, in the original sense of that word and its old English meaning, *to belove, to cast one's heart upon*. I trust in God. The fundamental posture of my life is one of confident trust in God.

Thus, Christian faith was born in the wake of the crucified and risen one, and the ongoing experience of his presence with those who became his immediate followers. That Christian tradition which was born at Easter, was a tradition that stood in continuity with that Jewish womb from which it emerged. That continuity with the face of Israel meant, of course, that the God embodied in Jesus was the God of creation.

There was an intentional purpose to connect the God of Jesus with the God of Israel, for as the Hebrew scriptures began, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," so in the Gospel of John, as one example, we have "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God," trying to say, as a matter of fact, we don't believe in some other God. We believe in the God of our forebears, we believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We believe in the creator of the heavens and the earth. This God we believe is revealed, embodied in the flesh of Jesus, for the word that was in the beginning in the fullness of time became flesh and dwelt among us, this God embodied in Jesus, present with us still.

What God?

God the Creator.

What God?

The God revealed in the face of Jesus.

What God?

The God ... don't you experience the burning heart even as we speak?

Thus, we have the Trinitarian format of the Apostles Creed, for example. "I believe in God the father, I believe in Jesus Christ his only son, I believe in the Holy Spirit." The Trinitarian form of the Apostles Creed is simply the setting forth of the experience that they had of God, of God revealed in Jesus, of God experienced in the Holy Spirit. Gradually, little by little, things came into focus. Three hundred and twenty-five years after Jesus, the Council of Nicea met, and the Nicene Creed is still used in the Church. *Credo*. I believe. The Apostles Creed coming together in its form as we know it some centuries later, but still, these are very early beginnings. *Credo*. I believe in God. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

This morning is Earth Day and what a glorious Earth Day it is, and on this Earth Day as we continue our series, "Credo," I believe, I want to think about creation, for the God whom we confess, the God whom we have experienced in Jesus, the God who is present with us in the Spirit, is the God, we say, who created the heavens and the earth. In that Genesis account we have Israel's testimony of faith that creation, the cosmos, the physical reality of which we are a part, the tapestry into which we are woven, is not just an accident. It is not just a chance unraveling

of whatever, but is the result of an intention that God created the heavens and the earth, and that creation at the end of the account, and the verse that I failed to read, verse 31, says, "God looked at all that was made and behold, it was very good." An affirmation of creation. An affirmation of the natural world.

That is not an insignificant fact, for there are great spiritual traditions that do not understand the natural world, the physical world in that positive sense. There are great spiritual traditions with great spiritual insights that see, rather, matter as evil. They see a dualism of life in darkness and the darkness and the evil being carried in matter, and salvation for such a tradition is not the resurrection of the body, but it is, rather, the deliverance from the prison house of the body. It is a spiritual kind of existence, to be set free from the body, to be set free from matter. So, when the Genesis creation account says that God said it was very good, it is not insignificant, and the implications of that are great. I'm not going to draw them out this morning. That is not my intention. But, I want to say that the faith of Israel that saw creation as the creation of God in a very positive light has impacted us in a very positive sense in terms of our understanding of the body and nature.

Of course, as you go on in that first chapter of Genesis, we have, as well, this word to the human pair, the human person that was created, "Be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth." That word was also a word intended very positively. It is a word of human dignity, calling the human being into co-creatorship with God, to become an agent in the unfolding of creation. But, that biblical word that comes at the end of the creation story has been a word that has been criticized rather severely in recent years in terms of the environmental crisis and the ecological crisis that we are experiencing in our world today.

I can remember when I first read a critique of Genesis 1 as one of the sources of the environmental crisis. This goes back a good number of years, and I still remember it was in a book review, and the book took the Jewish scriptures and Christian scriptures to task for that mandate at the end of chapter one that said "subdue the earth," and it said that that created a domination model that gave license to the human creature to exploit the earth. I can remember when I read that and I remember my resistance to it. I was resistant to it because it went contrary to everything I had ever been taught or my whole understanding of that first chapter of Genesis.

I had understood that first chapter of Genesis was lifting up the human being, as I said, as some agent of creation and as a matter of fact, saying here it is. Develop it. Not exploit it, to be sure, but develop it. Utilize it, use its resources, become a co-creator with God. And when I first read that as a criticism, I was not at all ready to receive it. I was not really fully cognizant of the crisis into which our physical universe and our planet had come. I wasn't really terribly concerned about it because, after all, I was a minister of the Gospel and I was concerned about the souls of my people and I didn't have a lot of time to worry about the

earth. That was the day of my rather conservative past when I would have thought to celebrate Earth Day on a Sunday would have been sacrilege, in which I would have gone out and gotten those young people out cleaning up the environment and brought them into church! Good grief! You don't let them get away from hearing a good sermon by cleaning up papers and bottles out in the environment! Liberals would do that. Let the godless do that. We worship because we're concerned about spiritual things.

I can remember this old article from *Newsweek*, which says, "In the major religions of the West, the world of nature from planets to plankton has little theological significance. As peoples of the Book, Jews, Christians, Muslims, look primarily to sacred text for God's revelation. The enveloping universe may offer evidence of divine wisdom and power, but it plays no part in the essential drama of mankind's sin and salvation. What matters is human redemption, not divine creation."

Amen and amen. That is what I was about. I was about getting people saved. I was about getting people spiritually right with God. I had very little concern, very little understanding of any kind of spiritual obligation to be worried about the good earth. Of course, God created it. Of course, God said it was good, so let's use it. And then let's get on with this matter of sin and salvation.

I am confessing to you that that is where I was. I honestly can remember when I first saw that critique, I wasn't ready to receive it. But I recognize now that the critique is legitimate. It is not that you cannot interpret the first chapter of Genesis in a positive sense, and the word that probably puts the best face on it is the word *stewardship*, and there has been a good deal made in recent years to put a positive spin on the biblical revelation to say that we are called to be stewards of the earth, shepherds of the earth, to care for the earth. I do believe that is a legitimate interpretation of "be fruitful, multiply and subdue the earth." But, the fact remains that "subdue the earth" created a domination model which did give license for the development of the created order by the human creature which very easily slides into the exploitation of the good earth by the ingenious and clever human creature.

So here we are today celebrating an Earth Day in our worship, acknowledging that our environment is in crisis and our planet is in crisis, and that it becomes a spiritual concern, a concern to find a better model than the biblical model. Perhaps instead of a domination model in the words of "subdue the earth," would it not be better for us to think in terms of a sacramental model? Sacraments in the Church are the use of physical, material means for the conveying of spiritual meaning of the sacred. In the first service, we conclude with the breaking of bread and pouring of the cup, and the fruit of the vine and the grain of the field into a loaf become the mediators, the vehicle by which we receive the grace of God. In the waters of baptism, that natural element becomes a vehicle of grace. We use the physical. The physical, we know, can be the agent of conveying the spiritual,

and I would suggest that a conception of the universe in sacramental terms would remind us that permeating the structure of reality is the Creator Spirit, and that the creation itself, when we have eyes to see it, can become the vehicle of the holy and the sacred. Rather than an exploitation or a domination model, a sacramental model will enable us to behold the wonders of our world and to say, "Oh, my God!" That, I think, would be a great step forward from where we have been traditionally and I must confess that it is for me a relatively new and fresh understanding. Yet, as I have come to see that there is something much bigger and broader than sin and salvation, as I have come to see the whole of creation with eyes of wonder as the mediator of the sacred, that world has become far more precious to me. I know it can happen.

Because of the constant harassment of one of my children, I began again this week to walk, and I feel rather good about that. People say to me, "Don't you feel good when you're done?" and I say, "No, I don't. I feel tired." But, you know, one does what one ought to do, and so I was walking yesterday on one of my favorite treks south of where we live and there is this ancient, gnarled tree. Its trunk is huge, and it has these huge branches low down so that a child can catch them and climb up through that trunk system, and it soars in the sky. Yesterday, as I was coming back, the sun caught the buds about to burst into leaf, and I looked at that gnarled, old trunk that has seen so many seasons and I said to myself, "You old devil, you're going to do it again, aren't you?" The next time through there will be a leafy canopy that will give shade from the sun's rays and that tree will be regaled again in all of its wonder and all of its glory.

Coming in this morning, I checked as I always do, Little Pigeon Creek, and Mrs. Beautiful White Swan is faithfully on her nest, as Mr. Swan glides about as most irresponsible males do. As I look at that, I see wonder. It is beautiful. It is exhilarating. Then I think of the tragedy it would be to lose the awesomeness of the earth. What we have to do is recognize that we have come to a point of development with our great capabilities as human creatures, with our scientific knowledge and our technological breakthroughs, where we can move beyond sustainable development, which seems to me is some kind of an ideal. We have come to a point where we can develop such that the resources of nature are outstripped without the time or the ability for nature to regenerate itself. We have come to such a degree of insight and knowledge and control that we can actually alter significant natural cycles.

Ancient, primitive peoples lived in the rhythm of nature. In the First Axial Period, one of the most significant periods in the history of humankind, 800 to 200 before Christ, all the great religions of the world that we know today were formed. It was a time of the self-consciousness of the human being, the moving out of that tribal identity and that moving away from the cycles of nature, the cycles of the earth, the fertility cycles, and all of the development that we know, particularly in the West, is the consequence of that movement, back a few centuries before Jesus Christ. In the rise of that consciousness that allowed us to step out of nature and

to become an agent over against nature, the one thing that we did lose, for all that we have gained, is that sense of connectedness in the web of being, in the chain of being, and, if there is one thing that is incumbent upon us to recapture, it is that sense of being woven into this awesome creation. You see, the biblical writer had no sense of 15 billion years of evolutionary bio-historical development. But, here we are, and we can see it, we can test it, we know about it. Tragically, in issues like this, there become frenzied prophets who with great panic make claims that cannot be verified, and then on the other side there are vested interests that want to hear nothing about it, whether there be hell to pay or not. And so, we get this impasse of opposing views. It is so necessary for us to get beyond that rhetoric to decent, civil, human conversation in order that we may preserve this good earth and realize the divine intention.

I was thinking last evening about what it might take for the whole human family to become aware and aroused to tend the garden of the earth. I was remembering as a lad the Second World War. We were just ordinary people. I remember our old '41 Oldsmobile had on the right-hand corner a card that was an "A" card. That meant three gallons of gas a week. That meant we could go to the evening service, the morning service, midweek service, and get groceries on Saturday, and that was it. The rest of the time that car sat there. We didn't have any gas. We didn't have a lot of meat, either, because it took red tokens and I still don't like oleomargarine because it is what I had to use instead of butter. I remember as a lad the Second World War and those rather severe limitations.

And yet, you know, there was no question about it, no sacrifice was too great. There was no grumbling about it. We were concerned only for those who were serving their country in the war zones. We were concerned only for the preservation of our freedom. We were concerned only for the dignity and the honor of this nation, for democracy, liberty, freedom, and all of those values that had made us a great people. No sacrifice was too great.

I was thinking that as a lad I grew up near the bank of the Kalamazoo River. My father was a superintendent of Hercules Powder Company which used to be Papermakers Chemical. There were a lot of chemicals, folks. I used to go over there as a little brat and bother the maintenance person who used to have to take carloads of what they called "satin white." We took them way out into the back property and dumped them on the banks of the Kalamazoo River. As a child growing up next to the river, the river held no fascination for me. It was a stinking mud hole. I wonder now why it took so long to come to awareness of the wonder of a tree, of the majesty of a river, of the marvel of God's creation. I wonder. What will it take?

Now, for sure, I want whoever does anything to do it such that it won't impinge on my pension funds. That's probably the issue, isn't it? But, what will it take before we have eyes again to see this good earth, God's gift? Let us tend the garden.