

Westgate Baptist Community  
Lent 1 29 Feb 2004  
“Creation Waiting”  
A sermon by Geoff Wraight

## **What’s Lent got to do with The Ecological Crisis?**

Purpose: To introduce the theme of Renewing Creation. To see the link between Creation and Redemption in Christ as a central part of our faith. To see the connection between and participation in the renewal of humanity and the environment is part of our reflective journey to the cross.

March 7 – Outdoor Service: Creation Groaning

March 14 – Creation Birthing – reflection on Gen 1 as a story of birth – creation theology.

March 21 – Creation Reconciled – reflection on the invitation to be reconnected with the environment and to see that resurrection is a symbol and reason for hope for the earth.

March 28 – Creation Renewed – the vision of a new reality – happening already!

### **Intro:**

I wonder if you can remember the first time you flew in an aeroplane? There is something incredible about that feeling and for me I still feel it on the odd occasion I do fly. That amazing sense of place that you get when you look out the window on the city and its suburbs layed out before you like a giant map. When the streets and buildings of you home town are seen in the perspective of the whole city and the city in the perspective of the land surrounding it and the land surrounding it in the perspective the wider landscape and part of the world it belongs too. For me, it is a wonderful and humbling experience to be reminded of the connectedness of everything.

Sometimes I think the old saying, “you can’t see the wood for the trees” is more fully understood when we are suddenly gifted with a new and broader perspective of how the whole has a shape and life that we are often not even aware of in our own parochial corner of existence.

In faith and in our understanding of the world I think there is a similar experience when we suddenly or gradually have our eyes opened to a new persppective of God.

In the Romans 8 passage, I reckon Paul is having one of those “wood and trees” experiences. He is inviting the readers to see the bigger picture that is connected to their own understanding and experience of faith and hope. To look past the trees and see the forest, to look past their own individual concerns and see themselves as part of something much greater and even mind-blowing in its implication.

There are two quite radical ideas presented in this almost poetic piece of the apostle Paul's writing

The first is that Creation is not some lifeless mass of matter that in some sense is disposable and in need of replacement. Creation is depicted as a **subject** with an inner longing.

The second is that Creation is **included** in the hope for renewal and liberation from bondage.

Creation has been waiting and longing for the day when it will be free from the curses and bondage it has suffered as a result of being estranged by humankind and treated as a thing to be exploited or dominated instead of loved and cooperated with.

In the context of Romans this is a kind of strange development. Especially given the what seems to be a very human focus of God's salvation in Christ. But here we have a radical view of Creation that implies a very different world view than that which has commonly been attributed to Paul.

The crucial question is how we view God and Creation. And this question hinges on our interpretations of the Genesis stories.

For a good part of the church's history there has been a dominant view of Creation that I would call the "mechanistic" view. Often this has been characterised by the Divine Clockmaker image..

The image is of the Divine Clockmaker (God) winding up a Giant clock (the Earth) and setting on the mantelpiece of heaven to tick away as a separate entity. When things go wrong God the clockmaker has to fix the problem and in the end may decide to trash the project and start again.

In this view, God and the world are separate and God's representatives on the earth are humans. The subject and focus of God is on his relationship with the humans and in their longing for perfection and escape from the flawed and physical world of sin.

The humans task is to dominate and exploit the earth for their own benefit. God and Spirit are separate and good. Earth and physical are less than God and essentially evil – or the dominion of Satan.

The ultimate goal is to escape the physical world and achieve perfection in the spiritual world – to get to heaven.

I may have over stated this dualistic world view but there is no question that this basic theological view has distorted and influenced the way the west in particular has related to the earth and creation for centuries.

The earth and its attendant life in flora and fauna is seen as simply the physical context in which humankind is placed. It therefore is to be used and abused to our advantage.

Humanity in this view is seen as the centre of creation and as the only thing made in God's image. The myth of endless development and the cult of limitless progress can be traced to this view of humans as the centre of all things.

In Christian and other religions Humanity and human history is seen as the sole object and goal of salvation and thus has developed apocalyptic scenarios based on literal interpretations of certain prophetic passages of the Bible. We shouldn't worry that the earth is being destroyed as God is going to do anyway and start again with the survivors with a new one.

The results of these views have been devastating for the environment and for life on this planet.

Only now are we beginning to wake up to the fact that we can't go on with rampaging development and not pay the consequences. The earth is dying at an ever-quickenening rate.

One of the key issues is the loss of species due the destruction of rainforest. More than 50 percent of all types of living things—as many as five million species of plants, animals, and insects—live in tropical rainforests. Rainforest destruction, currently estimated at more than thirty million acres per year, poses a threat to each and every one of these species. It is estimated that 100 species become extinct every day due to tropical deforestation. Approximately 5 to 10 percent of tropical forest species will become extinct each decade during the next half-century. Current rates of species extinction are comparable to the five greatest mass extinctions in world history.

All of the Earth's species are part of a complex, interdependent web of life. The extinction of just one species can affect an entire ecosystem. Humans are a part of this web of life, and thus we too are dependent on other species for our survival. For example, twenty-five percent of the world's pharmaceutical products are derived from tropical plants. The National Cancer Institute has identified three thousand plants as having anti-cancer properties; of these, 70 percent hail from the rainforest. Thousands of food products we rely on—from oranges and bananas to coffee and tea—also come either directly or indirectly from the rainforests.

In addition to the many products we derive from rainforests, the rainforest and its species provide many 'natural services' for which there is simply no substitute. For example, rainforests cover less than 7 percent of the Earth's surface, yet they receive almost half of all the rain that falls on land. Rainforests serve a vital function by absorbing this rain and then slowly releasing it into rivers and streams. As long as

rainforests remain intact, rivers run clear and flow throughout the year. When rainforests are destroyed, rivers swell and fill with muddy sediment after rainfalls, and then shrink during dry spells. This results in soil erosion, floods, and droughts, often with devastating consequences.

Rainforests also absorb and store vast amounts of carbon—an invaluable service since human activity releases nearly seven billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year. Rainforests destruction not only releases additional carbon into the atmosphere, but deprives the Earth of one of its primary means of absorbing and storing excess carbon. While there is debate about the exact nature and results of the greenhouse effect, there is ample evidence to show considerable climate change over the last two decades.. with potentially far ranging effects, including rising seas, disruption of agriculture, species extinction, and an increase in the frequency and severity of storms.

The most extensive river system on the driest continent on earth, the Murray-Darling system has been systematically and extensively dammed for irrigation over the last 100 years. The devastating results of this un-checked exploitation of the rivers is only now being realised. 100s of thousands of hectares of land have become and are becoming ruined as a result of rising salt levels due to the destruction of native vegetation and over irrigation for crops and grazing.

We could go on and on but the point is this. The earth is suffering, the land is suffering as a result of a failure to understand the interdependence of all creation and humanity as just one part in the web of life and ecology of this planet.

The ecological enlightenment is calling forth a new world view and I think a re-thinking of our theology too.

When we take a second look at the creation narratives in the old testament we discover that in fact God, rather than being separate, is intimately connected to the whole creation. I want to explore a little further these alternative views of Creation theology in the coming weeks but for now...

We see with Paul, that rather than being an inanimate object, The creation is subject of God's renewal and redemption. The Earth is longing for renewal and is waiting in hope of renewal.

As Thorwald Lorenzen puts it...

For too long we have understood the consequences of the life, death and resurrection of Christ in only historical and human terms. We have related it to our human salvation and failed to include the healing of the environment that sustains us.

Nature and the cosmos provide the context in which human life takes place. All talk about creation, sin, and salvation is therefore hanging in the air if it is not related to a theological appreciation of nature and the cosmos.

WE can begin to see the connection with the Lenten journey to the cross. We begin to see with Paul that rather than a clockmaker and clock relationship there is in fact a Parent and child relationship between God and the earth. The anticipation of birth and pain of parenthood can be found in this picture of Creation and redemption.

And story of the incarnation of God in Christ through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate in Lent and Easter literally means that God takes flesh, matter and the world seriously – so seriously that in Jesus the divine enters into the very processes of material existence.

The consequences of this are obvious. If God takes matter so seriously that God becomes actually identified with matter, then surely we too must take it profoundly seriously.

As Paul Collins concludes, I see Christ not as the center of history, but as the ultimate symbol that God take God's material world seriously. ... Matter is the symbol of the Ultimate. The incarnation is profoundly about ecology.

Thus as we journey with Jesus to the Cross we are invited to feel the hope and anticipation of the whole earth in the resurrection hope.

We are invited to wait with Creation, to hear her groaning, anticipate the rebirth and reconciliation that is possible and participate in the renewal of ourselves and the earth that we are so dependent on for our life.

We are invited to lift our horizon and see past the trees in front of us and to catch a glimpse of the forest. To know again that life and peace, non-violence and love for the loveless are in fact the central realities of a world that still belongs to God.