

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Creation Care Sunday
October 15-16, 2022
Proverbs 8:22-31; Colossians 1:11-20
St. Luke 24:44-53

How did we get here? How did we get to the point where churches even needed to consider a "creation care" Sunday? After all, doesn't Genesis tell us that, when God created the world, He saw (repeatedly) that it was very good? "And God saw that it was good." Don't the Psalms continually reaffirm that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"? Shouldn't it be self-evident for God's people to fulfill our calling as stewards, as caretakers, of God's good creation? Aren't we all heirs of St. Francis's reverence for the natural world of earth and sky, of oceans and mountains, of rivers and prairies, of plants and animals, of seedtime and harvest? So...what happened between the time of St. Francis and our time that necessitated this renewed interest in the care of creation?

There is, of course, no one simple answer. But, let me suggest that at least part of the answer is the so-called Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries. To be sure, some positive developments were brought about by the Enlightenment. Democracy replaced the divine right of kings. Natural science replaced alchemy and superstition. Free enterprise replaced feudalism. Medicine moved beyond leeches and bloodletting. And, education was a privilege no longer reserved for the wealthy, the powerful, and the well-born. For all of this, we owe a debt to the Enlightenment. Indeed, our American republic is often regarded as one of the "first fruits" of the Enlightenment. But -- for good or ill -- the Enlightenment gained its insights and its inspiration, not from the Judeo-Christian tradition, not from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, not from the great Christian thinkers and teachers, but from a rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy.

No, much of the inspiration for the Enlightenment came with the rediscovery of a poem by the Roman philosopher Lucretius, a rediscovery which repopularized many of the ideas of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Now, a few sentences cannot do justice to either Lucretius or Epicurus. But, among their ideas which the Enlightenment "glommed onto" were two of particular note. One is that the god (or the gods), if they exist at all, are a long way off and uninvolved in human affairs. And, the second was that the world was basically an evil place, filled with sorrow and suffering, about which the god (or the gods), cared little and did nothing. Echoing the great Greek philosophers, the Enlightenment suggested that the best humans could hope for then was to make the best of an unalterable situation. And, what emerged from all of this was a philosophy or theology known as "Deism," the belief that a god may have created the universe, but is no longer involved in its affairs.

So pervasive were these ideas, however, of a distant and uninvolved god and of an essentially harsh and evil world, that much of Western Christianity -- instead of opposing those ideas -- created something of a synthesis. To wit, the Western Church conceded that the world was, if not exactly evil, an inhospitable place, filled with sorrow and suffering, and that the God of the Bible seemed generally unwilling or unable to do anything about that. The Christian Faith then refocused itself largely on "the life of the world to come," where, at long last, God's people will be delivered from the sorrow and suffering of this world. This was then coupled with a misreading or mistranslation of just one or two Bible passages that seemed to suggest that this world, God's good earth, was doomed to be swept away in some sort of fiery conflagration. Implicit, then, in that synthesis between Deism and the Christian Faith is that the world itself is essentially transient and disposable, simply

to be exploited for whatever short-term benefit humanity could derive from it.

And, this synthesis then was expressed, even in some of the Church's hymnody. The hymnal I grew up with had one hymn entitled "The World is Very Evil," a hymn which expressed the hope of being transported away from this world to "a sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect." Perhaps better known is the hymn "I'm But a Stranger Here; Heaven is My Home," a hymn which continued that "earth is a desert drear" where "danger and sorrow stand, 'round me on every hand." And, not to pick on one of your favorites, but the final stanza of "How Great Thou Art" suggests that "when Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart." The implication in these hymns (and countless more) is that the believer's real home is not here -- on God's good earth where God has placed us a caretakers -- but in some other realm, light-years removed from this world's sorrow and suffering. All this, I'm convinced, was the result of that attempt to synthesize the Christian Faith with the prevailing worldview of the Enlightenment, an attempt to harmonize the Christian Faith with the tenets of Deism.

And, the irony was and is that, even as Christians happily affirmed that "God so loved the world," the subliminal message was that "God so hates the world that He is planning on destroying it." And, it's not a long leap from that to an understanding that the world is essentially transient and disposable, simply to be exploited for whatever short-term benefit humanity can derive from it.

But, the question of how we got here, how did we get to the point where churches need a "Creation Care Sunday," is less important than the question of where do we go from here. And, where we need to go first is back to our Scriptures, our Scriptures which tell the story -- not of a distant or absentee god -- but of a God Who wants nothing more than to dwell on His

good earth with the people for whom He created it. In many ways, that's the story of the Scriptures from the day when God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the evening to that great day described in the Revelation to St. John, when God and the Lamb will descend to a newly-restored earth, and "Behold, the dwelling of God is with His people. He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people." That's God's hope and God's desire and God's promise from Genesis to Revelation -- to dwell in God's good world with His people. That's the Scriptural hope and promise implicit in the Resurrection. The Scriptural hope and promise was never that we will go to be with God, but that God is coming home to dwell with us, right here in His good creation!

So, the question remains: "Where do we go from here?" And, maybe the answer is "What do you do when you're expecting someone you can hardly wait to welcome home?" Amen