**Introduction**

Preparing for *Preaching in the Biocommons,* I realized that I need to tell you about the theological framework and assumptions that I bring to these texts. Otherwise, the interpretations I’ll offer probably won’t make as much sense as any of us would hope.

I’ll begin with a content summary so you can see where this long paper is going. I included these materials in part because they have been so formative for me and thus inform my work on the texts. But Robyn also led me to understand that some of you may be looking for a new point of view and for resources to support your ongoing learning in this field. For some, these things may be so familiar that you need read no further. But if you’re not too familiar with the traditions and models you see in this summary, then I encourage you to keep reading and to give some thought to the material I’ve put together for your consideration.

1. Creation-Redemption-Consummation. This lays out a cosmic Christology and a vision of ecological redemption/fulfillment stemming from the work of the patristic theologian Irenaeus, as interpreted by three 20th century Lutheran theologians. For me, this represents one of the few theological models of interpretation adequate to the scope and actuality of the challenges we face.
2. Relational Creation. This section reviews Lutheran biblical scholar Terrence Fretheim’s “relational” or “process” reading of how the character of creation is represented in the OT. Seems to me that this interpretation of creation provides the biblical basis for the Christology of ecological redemption/fulfillment outlined in the prior section
3. The Created Co-Creator. This section, engaging the work of the systematic theologian Philip Hefner, discusses a theological anthropology consistent with the Christology and relational view of creation given in the first two sections. Hefner’s work forms a bridge between the theological/biblical community of discourse on the one hand, and, on the other, the community of critical reason that builds upon the sciences.
4. The Land Ethic, Updated & Revised. This section discusses an ethical principle based on Aldo Leopold’s celebrated “Land Ethic.” This principle can guide the believing community as it works to turn theological vision and moral commitment into practical action. While it does not presuppose the truth of those claims, it nevertheless is compatible with them and can help to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders in promoting practical outcomes consistent with that Christian spiritual/moral vision.
5. Creationtide: A Model of Care for Creation. This section summarizes an interpretive model I’ve constructed to organize the Christian life as care for creation. It represents a practical way of engaging the theological/biblical/ethical materials previously reviewed here so that they become accessible to shape congregational practice and discourse.

**Preliminary: Some Underlying Assumptions**

First, I understand the universe we live in to be God’s Creation, all of it “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Second, my understanding of Creation follows the emergent, ecological cosmology put forward by contemporary physical and life sciences, grasped in light of systems thinking. Third, I assume that Creation is sacramental. That is, each created thing and all created things together are modes of divine presence mediating to us some sort of holy communion with the triune God in whom we believe. Fourth, this sacramental Creation has an intrinsic value for itself and for God that supersedes any instrumental, use-values that humans place upon it. Fifth, any theological or biblical interpretation we offer must, in order to be credible and functional in relation to contemporary society, take into account an emergent/ecological cosmology, systems thinking, and the sacramental nature of Creation. Sixth, these interpretations must, in some non-trivial sense, speak to the good of humans and of the whole integrally-interrelated Earth community under the conditions of the current crisis of global biospheric disruption brought on by the greenhouse effect, toxic pollution, habitat decimation, and the accelerating wholesale commodification of every entity on Earth through globalizing capitalist political economies.

**Creation – Redemption–Consummation**

It took me years before I realized that the frustration and affliction I often felt in preaching resulted mostly from my confusion about the Bible’s epic story of creation, redemption, and creation’s fulfillment — or consummation, as it’s often termed. The work of Sittler, Santmire and others (e.g., Gustaf Wingren) stemming from that of Irenaeus has been important in providing me with a theology of creation that puts “redemption” in its proper place as a servant for creation’s consummation. Here’s a quote from Sittler’s famous 1962 address to the World Council of Churches (“Called to Unity”) that announces his cosmic Christology [interpreting Col. 1:15-20] as the adequate theological context of interpretation for ecological redemption:

These verses sing out their triumphant and alluring music between two huge and steady poles — “Christ” and “all things.” … Here it is declared that the sweep of God’s restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six-times repeated *ta panta.* Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man who is God with us and God for us — all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him. He comes to all things, not as a stranger, for his is the firstborn of all creation, and in him all things were created. He is not only the matrix and *prius* of all things; he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things: for all things were created in him and for him. … We must not fail to see the nature and the size of the issue that Paul confronts and encloses in this vast Christology. In propositional form it is simply this: A doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation.

Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace* (eds. Bouma-Prediger & Bakken), 39-40.

Sittler was, so to speak, the grand-parent of ecological theology, at least in Lutheran circles, and introduced themes from Irenaeus and Eastern Orthodox theology into Protestant circles as his overture to what we now call “care for creation.” H. Paul Santmire, who learned much from Sittler, gives us a compact account of Irenaeus’ vision as a theology of creation that can helpfully inform our own praxis in light of the current ecological crisis. Here’s an excerpt from Santmire’s book *The Travail of Nature*:

Irenaeus’ theology… is an exposition of what can be called creation history. His thought begins with a picture of God’s act of bringing the whole creation into being, to the end that God might bring all he has created to final fulfillment, through an all-encompassing history. In the middle of this comprehensive creation history, Irenaeus then sees the figure of the Incarnate Word who — as the eternal Logos — together with the Spirit of God — is the ever-present life-giving principle of creation history and who — as the Logos become flesh — moves the whole creation decisively toward the goal of fulfilling the original divine intention for creation.

To understand this fundamental framework of Irenaeus’ theology, it is probably necessary for the modern reader to make a distinction explicitly, which Irenaeus seems to have taken for granted. This has to do with the scope and meaning of the final fulfillment of the creation history. God’s original intention in creating the world… is to bring all things to their final fulfillment or consummation. Hence, so to speak, there would have been a final fulfillment even had Adam not sinned. That is the inner, although mostly implicit, logic of this creation-history framework. This theme is most visible in Irenaeus’ thought in the context of anthropology. He pictures Adam as being created by God as a child, destined for growth [ultimately, to full maturity in Christ, i.e., *theosis* or divinization of the redeemed human –{BB}]. So the whole creation would have had a history of growth and consummation, apart from any disruption brought by human sinfulness. … Now Adam did in fact sin, and his heirs remain in bondage to the devil, in Irenaeus’ view. Hence Christ has a twofold vocation: to fulfill the creation on the one hand and to redeem humanity on the other. …Irenaeus’ is a theology of unity of all things (*ta panta*) under the creative providence of God. …This is the universal “economy” (*oikonomia*) of God. “Creation, the incarnation of Christ, redemption, and resurrection,” Aloys Grillmeier explains, “belong together as different parts of the one all-embracing saving work of God.” … This creation history or divine economy has a pronounced eschatological character… as well as a christological center. All things are moving forward, are destined for, a final day of salvation or consummation. In this sense, for Irenaeus, the whole of creation history is a saving history. Everything will be saved. Nothing of the good creation will be lost. …

Even Christ… is understood in terms of that larger creation history of God…. As the Incarnate Word or Logos of the Creator, Christ recapitulates what has gone before in the history of creation, particularly in human history. In so doing, he both overcomes the distortions of sin, which entered through Adam, and he carries the whole history of creation one final step into the era of its last days, thus serving as the inaugurator of the final consummation, through his resurrection. As Irenaeus writes:

The Word, being made human, summing up all things in Himself, so that as in the super-celestial, spiritual and invisible things the Word of God is supreme, so also in things visible and corporeal He might possess supremacy, and taking to Himself the pre-eminence, as well as constituting himself Lord of the Church, He might draw all things to Himself at the proper time.

Hence the vocation of Jesus Christ… is… to serve the whole divine history of creation, not just fallen and redeemed humanity — until the very end, when he will deliver his rule over to the Father, who will then be all in all.

Santmire, *Travail,* 35-7

Below, I’ll share another excerpt from *Travail* that will relate this view of “creation history” more directly to our text study for *Preaching in the Biocommons.* First, however, lest you think that this creation history point of view is marginal, I want to add the voice of Philip Hefner from his Locus on “The Creation” in *Christian Dogmatics (Vol. I),* the definitive tomes on Lutheran theology when I was in seminary (Phil was my systematics professor):

Irenaeus developed his celebrated Christology of “recapitulation” (*anakephalaiosis*), which spoke of the created world as being incomplete in the beginning but possessing the capacity to grow into its fullness. Christ was affirmed by Irenaeus as the prototype of what creation should become. Christ recapitulated, incorporated all things and their destiny into himself. To be created in the image of God meant to be created in Christ’s image and to grow into the Christ-destiny for which God has prepared creation.

Irenaeus thus effectively counters the view that would set God against the world, that would put a part of the created world outside of God’s sphere of responsibility, and that would abandon a part of the world to remain outside of God’s redemption. …Irenaeus repudiated both these core elements by insisting that the world was created in Christ, that Christ is the prototype of its development or growth, and that at the end it will grow into Christ-perfection. …Irenaeus’ specific resolutions of the problems posed by dualism are distinctive and not reiterated universally throughout the tradition. Nevertheless, the points he made have become the Christian faith’s perennial response to dualisms that threaten the fundamental assertion that God is the God on whom all creation is dependent for its being. (*CD I,* 305-6)

The primary affirmation in the creation-doctrine is that we are dependent on the Creator for our being; the primary affirmation with respect to evil is that we are dependent on God for victory over evil, whatever form that victory takes. …

The ground for motivation to enter the struggle against evil lies in the basic Christian notion that humans live in a realm that includes nothing else but this created order and the will and power of God who has created the world and whose intention is to bring it to consummation. …Christians and Jews have not looked for an escape hatch out of history and nature. Rather, they look for their hope in the future of the created continuum, its consummation at the hands of a creator God. This being the case, the Christian has a vested interest in the betterment and perfection of this created world, regardless of how Christians… have defined the terms “betterment” and “perfection.” Since evil is a definite obstacle to the purposes of God and God’s will to consummate the world, the Christian should be mightily motivated to participate in God’s struggle against evil. (*CD I,* 312-13)

Journey to a Good, Fecund Land

The connection between this “creation history” model — creation, redemption in Christ, global or cosmic fulfillment — and the Lent-Easter Sunday text study we’re planning is articulated in Santmire’s book *The Travail of Nature.* There, he develops a typology of metaphors and motifs to clarify biblical and theological materials pertinent to ecological theology. In my interpretation of the texts for the Sundays of Lent and Palm Sunday, I’ll rely on Santmire’s “Ecological Motif,” which comprises two root metaphors: the metaphor of migration to a good land; and the metaphor of fecundity. Key instances of the migration metaphor are the Exodus from Egypt (an important part of Lenten texts and traditions) and the return from the Babylonian exile. The aim of these migrations is freedom in the Promised Land, the locus of fulfillment for the human in communion with Creator and Creation. Cf. Deut. 8:8-9; and Isa. 43:19-21. A key text replete with metaphors of fecundity is Ps. 104, e.g., v. 24: “O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the Earth is full of your creatures.” Together, they constitute the “ecological motif.” See *Travail,* 14-29.

Santmire adduces this ecological motif and its metaphors in explicating Irenaeus’ theology of creation history :

It will be evident… that the major operative and integrating root metaphor in his thought… is migration to a good land. …Since, for Irenaeus, that good land of the final fulfillment is so vividly the renewed good earth of the Creator of all things, and since the same Creator is perceived by Irenaeus as governing immediately now throughout the whole creation, that profound sense of ultimate material-vital-spiritual goodness flows back, as it were, and qualifies Irenaeus’ vision of the present life. As a result, the way is opened in Irenaeus’ thought for influence from the side of the metaphor of fecundity. The God who pours down infinite blessings at the very end, in other words, who will be all, who will one day renew all things, also takes on the role of the God who *now* blesses all things, who is *now* immediately present to them, who *now* constantly renews them in their courses in this world — a set of images which, taken together, is reminiscent of the celebration of the divine creativity in Psalm 104. For Irenaeus, the God who will be all in all, who will permeate all things with his glory… is already in some vital, although not fully realized sense, the God who is all in all now. (*Travail,* 38-9)

The creation-history model, along with the ecological motif, serves as the groundwork of my interpretation of the Lenten & Palm Sunday texts for *Preaching in the Biocommons*. I will suggest that these texts evoke a redemptive journey out of bondage to the Industrial Growth Society of late modern globalizing capitalism, through the desert of spiritual transformation, and into the Promised Land of the Ecozoic Era (Thomas Berry) — a yet-to-be determined evolutionary emergence of a mutually-enhancing human/Earth interrelationship.

**Relational Creation: Mutual Co-Arising of Creation, Human, and Divine Presence**

We propose to interpret biblical texts for preaching, so it will be helpful to clarify the point of view I bring to exegesis. I’ve been influenced by a Lutheran OT scholar with whom you may be familiar, Terrence Fretheim (emeritus, Luther Seminary). In his book *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Abingdon, 2005), he outlines some principles for OT interpretation. I’ll summarize a few key points because they seem essential to interpreting the Bible in a way that is faithful to the texts, respectful of Creation, and meaningful in context of the world-view of contemporary society.

First: Fretheim offers three categories to describe God’s creative activity: “To speak of ‘creation’ is to state that the cosmos does not simply exist; it was created by God. More particularly,… the creative activity of God includes the work of *originating, continuing, and completing creation*.” (*G&W,* 4). By “Originating Creation,” he means not only the physical universe, but also creative activity with other orders of life: social, cultural (including arts & sciences), religious, and national orders — in short, the comprehensive environment of our presence to God and to the world. “Continuing Creation” is God’s continuing creative activity sustaining creatures and holding everything in being, entailing development of the creation through time and space, leading to “the emergence of genuinely new realities in an increasingly complex world.” (*G&W,* 5-7). Thus,

This continuing creative activity means that God has an ongoing relationship to the world *as a Creator,* and that relationship, by virtue of who God is, brings into being that which is “new” again and again. God not only continues to care for creation and provide for its needs, as important as that is, but God also continues to create the genuinely new. God’s creative activity enables *the becoming of the creation*. …God’s continuing creation is as “good” as the original creation, pursued and shaped by fundamentally gracious purposes. Continuing creation has to do with the ongoing development of those earthly conditions that are most conducive to the flourishing of life in view of new times and places. Given the realities of sin and evil, such continuing creational activity will not proceed without significant opposition. But God will be creatively at work in the often tragic effects of such overt and covert resistance, unrestingly seeking to bring “good” out of evil, to liberate the captives and to build up communities.

Such understandings of creation also have implications for our view of the human being. The human is not a fixed entity from the beginning but, along with the rest of creation, is in the process of becoming. The human is not somehow exempted from ever new developments taking place in the larger creation. Creation as a whole is open to a future in which the genuinely new can be brought into being, and human beings are among the creatures creatively affected. Moreover, human beings are invited to play an important role in the becoming of such a world. Indeed, as we shall see, the texts will speak of God using both human and nonhuman creatures in this ongoing creative activity and such creaturely participation will not be inconsequential. To put the point positively, the creative activity of the human, in particular, has the potential of significantly enhancing the ongoing life of the world and every creature therein, indeed, bringing into being that which is genuinely new. (*G&W,* 8-9)

Fretheim’s third category is “Completing Creation.” Creating, Fretheim writes, “is also that divine eschatological action whereby God brings a new heaven and earth into being (Isa. 65:17-25; Rev. 21:1-5).” He continues,

… The character of the eventual completion of this creation is revealing of the direction for all God’s prior work, whether in creation or redemption. The books of Genesis and Revelation provide a creational bracket for the Bible, and texts in between are a continuing witness to the purposive work of God toward this new creation. …But this new creation is not simply a rearrangement of that which has existed; something genuinely new will come to be… of which salvation shall be a key component. (*G&W,* 9)

Second: Fretheim then distinguishes between three other key terms: *creation, redemption, and salvation.* Creation we have already discussed. Redemption means God’s work within lives brought into being by God’s creative activity. God’s work as creator, recognized or not, “actually and always precedes God’s work as Redeemer.” God’s work as Creator continues through and beyond historical redemptive actions. “Redemption does not do away with the life-giving effects of the Creator but stands in service of them. The objective of God’s work in redemption is to free people to be what they were created to be, the effect of which is named salvation.” (*G&W,* 10) Salvation is distinguished from creation:

The goal for the creation is not redemption; God’s redemption is a means to a new creation, and salvation will be the key characteristic of that new reality. This understanding, in turn, has implications for how one thinks about creation; the creation is not something to be left behind as God works on more important matters, such as redemption. To equate creation with redemption, or to subordinate creation to redemption, is to endanger the status of the world, including human beings, *as creation.* It is also to place in question God’s love for the creation in itself…, as if God’s goal was to get beyond creation to some other reality. Moreover, such an equation endangers the recognition that redemption has to do with much more than spiritual matters; it includes the healing of the body (finally, resurrection), indeed, the healing of the environment.

The upshot: “The objective of God’s redemptive activity is to transform the creation as it moves toward its eschatological goal. God’s goal is a new creation, not a new redemption. There must be redemption if creation is to be and become what God intends it to be, but the redemption is not an end in itself; it finally has to do with creation, a new creation.” (G&W, 12)

Third: The OT bears witness to a “relational Creator and a relational world. … Israel’s God is a relational God who has created a world in which interrelatedness is basic to the nature of reality; this God establishes relationships of varying sorts with all creatures, including a special relationship to the people of Israel. Fretheim develops this claim in four sections. I’ll quote a snippet from the third that catches the essence of what he’s driving at:

3. *This Relational God Has Created a World in Which All Creatures are Interrelated*. The world of the Hebrew Bible is a spiderweb of a world. Interrelatedness is basic to this community of God’s creatures. Each created entity is in symbiotic relationship with every other and in such a way that any act reverberates out and affects the whole, shaking this web with varying degrees of intensity. Being the gifted creatures that they are, human beings have the capacity to affect the web in ways more intense and pervasive than any other creature, positively and negatively, as we know very well in our own time.

This point may be illustrated by the way in which the Old Testament speaks of the effect of the moral order upon the cosmic order. That is, human and nonhuman orders are so deeply interconnected that human sin may have devastating effect on other creatures [cites examples.] It is important to recognize that such an understanding of interrelatedness stands over against any notion of a static or mechanistic world…. Given the genuineness of these relationships, there is a degree of open-endedness in the created order, which makes room for novelty and surprise, irregularities and randomness. …There is no little play in the system; one might speak of a complex, loose causal weave. The God speeches in the book of Job, with their witness to the complexity and ambiguity of the creation, are exemplary illustrations of this kind of world.

That the world is so interrelated makes our attempt to understand how God faithfully relates to its creatures more complex. To speak very generally, God so relates to this interrelated world that every movement in the web affects God as well; God will get caught up in these interconnections and work within them for the sake of the future of all creatures. Or, in other terms, we might say that God honors this interrelatedness and, in acting, takes into account both the order and the play of creation. (*G&W,* 19-20)

Fretheim concludes, “The Hebrew Bible urges us to think of God as being in a genuine relationship with every aspect of creation and intimately involved with every creature. In short, we need an understanding of the God-world relationship… that takes the word *relationship* seriously, which will in turn necessitate some recharacterization of traditional portrayals of the God of the Old Testament.” (*G&W,* 20) I might add that it will also necessitate recharacter-ization of the human and of creation in their mutual interrelationship.

Fretheim’s relational, process-oriented reading of the OT offers an interpretation of scriptural views of creation consistent with the cosmic Christology and motifs of ecological redemption represented the Lutheran-Irenaean theological tradition. According to Fretheim’s reading, God’s Creation, as relational and open-ended, is amenable to the salvation, expressed eschatologically in the emergence of a new heaven and new earth, that entails the resurrection of the body and the healing of the environment. Now we turn to a consider a theological anthropology corresponding to the Irenean cosmic Christology and the relational view of creation just reviewed.

**The Created Co-Creator**

Philip Hefner’s account of the human as a “created co-creator” offers a theological anthropology consistent with the ecological model of Creation and Christology of redemption and fulfillment that Sittler et al. have cultivated from its Irenaean roots. Hefner’s account of the co-creator also serves as a bridge from theology to the various discourses related to modern scientific thinking. To help us grasp the crucial significance of this concept, I’ll quote and summarize some of his writing on the “co-creator” found in his locus on “The Creation” in *Christian Dogmatics (Vol. I)*  and in his book, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Fortress, 1993).

In “The Human Being as Created Co-Creator,” a subsection of the locus on “The Creation,” Hefner engages the discussion by listing some essential human characteristics.

*Homo sapiens* is distinctive in terms of six important characteristics: consciousness, self-consciousness, the ability to make assessments, the ability to make decisions, the ability to act freely on those decisions, and that ability to take responsibility for such action. Such self-aware, free action becomes a kind of creating activity, a co-creating, with God. Humans can claim no arrogant credit for being co-creators; they *were created co-creators.* Even put in materialistic terms, humans did not evolve themselves; the evolutionary process — under God’s rule, we would argue — *evolved them as co-creators.*

To be co-creator means that *Homo sapiens* shares self-consciously and responsibly in the formation of the world and its unfolding toward its final consummation under God. Teilhard de Chardin has put this evocatively in his maxim that “man is evolution become aware of itself.” Whatever range we give to human creative activity, the destiny of that activity is to participate in and perfect the substance and goal of God’s creative activity. God’s creating is the norm for human co-creating, not in the sense that *Homo sapiens* is to equate its activity with God’s, but rather in the sense that human activity is perverse if it does not finally qualify as participation in and extension of God’s primordial will of creation. Put in this way, the created status of the human is thoroughly eschatological; that is, it is an unleashing, not a full-blown given that has simply to be reiterated and replicated throughout time. The primordial *humanum* that emerges from God’s creation is constituted by the calling (destiny) and the capacity to participate as an ordained co-creator in the creative thrust of God. That thrust consists of sharing as a free, self-aware creature in shaping the passage forward toward God’s own *telos* of the consummation and perfection of creation.

Thus construed, the motif of created co-creator points clearly to the distinctiveness of humans as creatures with a high destiny, a destiny that is essential to the world if it is to bear the mark of its creator God. The characteristics of being co-creator are in continuity, within the evolutionary scheme, with previous forms of life, but at the same time unique in their precise and highly sophisticated configuration in the human species. We suggest that this co-creatorhood is what it means to be “in the *image of God*.” The characteristics of being able to make self-aware, self-critical decisions, to act on those decisions, and to take responsibility for them — these are the characteristics which comprise the image of God in us. However, it is not just these characteristics that comprise this image. In addition, the human reflection on its unique abilities unveils a deep mystery that, if profoundly probed, clarifies to the human creature the sense in which they are grounded in a basic relationship to God. Without such grounding, the abilities themselves would mean little.

When humans ponder their co-creator status, they recognize that it includes the freedom to conceive of actions and to carry them out. …

That freedom presses us to the point where we recognize that finally it is neither an absolute mandate nor pure motivation that legitimates the action, but rather only our own free decision. Furthermore, to be co-creator means that we must continue to live with the decision and exercise our responsible co-creatorhood, whether that decision proves to be desirable or undesirable or, as is more likely, to have both desirable and undesirable consequences.

When we ponder our co-creatorhood at this depth, we discover our likeness to God and our origin and destiny in God, but we also come face to face with our own finitude, our own createdness. We do so when we recognize that, even though there is no legitimation for our action beyond our own free and responsible decision, such free and responsible action is limited. We cannot foresee adequately the outcomes of our most important actions, nor can we mitigate all the undesirable consequences of our free but finite decisions and actions. In the exercise of the *imago dei,* in carrying out our co-creatorhood, we come hard upon the fact of our createdness. This is the fact that our mandate to co-create has come to us as creatures, at the behest of the creator God *ex nihilo,* and not from our own self-generating will.

Furthermore, when we ponder such considerations, we come to know that our sin is both our understandable unwillingness to accept our status as co-creator — even our fear of that status — and our faulty execution of our co-creatorhood, once we are forced to accept it. This sin is both original and actual. With this contemporary motif in mind, we proceed to unfold the traditional materials that inform all thinking on Christian anthropology. [Hefner, “The Creation,” in *Christian Dogmatics I,* 326-328]

Hefner further develops the model of the human as created co-creator in *The Human Factor.*

The core of my proposal may be stated as follows:

Human beings are God’s created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us — the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God’s will for human beings.

I will elaborate this core by highlighting three basic elements in its structure…. (*HF,* 27)

1. The human being is created by God to be a co-creator in the creation that God has brought into being and for which God has purposes.
2. The conditioning matrix that has produced the human being — the evolutionary process — is God’s process of bringing into being a creature who represents the creation’s zone of a new stage of freedom and who therefore is crucial for the emergence of a free creation.
3. The freedom that marks the created co-creator and its culture is an instrumentality of God for enabling the creation (consisting of the evolutionary past of genetic and cultural inheritance as well as the contemporary ecosystem) to participate in the intentional fulfillment of God’s purposes. (*HF,* 32)

The affirmation of divine purposes is central to this understanding. Those purposes serve both as an indication that gives substance and a basis for hope to the creation, and also as a criterion for determining and assessing the work of the co-creator. The most important and arresting aspect of this basic image is the assertion that the human being was brought into being by God and that God’s purposes govern the cosmos, including humans. Furthermore, God’s purposes for the human species are to be referred to God’s purposes for the creation as such. (*HF,* 37-8)

[Note: In this chapter of *HF,* “A Theology of the Created Co-Creator,” Hefner offers a careful discussion of ‘divine purposes’ under the rubrics of ‘the method of teleonomy’ and ‘teleonomic values’ — presumably anticipating objections of those who aver that the universe cannot plausibly be construed as teleological in nature. See *HF,* 38-40.]

To summarize: human beings are created by God to be created co-creators whose proper task, freely exercised, is “to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us.” To do is “to participate in the intentional fulfillment of God’s purposes.”

The crucial practical problem, then, lies in “struggling to find our fit” with the natural world — discerning how we, as created co-creators, may best fulfill that mandate to birth the most wholesome future for nature. Hefner addresses this matter in discussing “the human niche” —

Against the background of what our scientific understandings tell us, it seems strange that the fundamental problem of our time is that we do not know where we fit into nature, nor how our patterns of living can be creative and also harmonious with the rhythms of the rest of nature. In those cases where we do have a glimpse of how the indicative of our kinship with nature is to be translated into imperative, we often resist and choose to go in different directions that seem to offer greater pleasure. …

Our lack of proper fit with nature rests finally in this essential aspect of our character: We have to discover what our kin in nature know by genetic programming. We distance ourselves from nature’s laws through our symbol-making tendencies. We insist that what other citizens of our ecosystem must receive as imperative, we can treat as hypothesis to be tested and manipulated. … Consequently we exercise our kinship poorly, whether it be with our fellow human beings or the rest of nature (*HF,* 68-9)

After briefly discussing “the problem of culture and symbols” as the means by which the human distances itself from nature’s laws, Hefner goes on to explore how our major religious symbol systems describe alienation from nature as sin. Having explored several aspects of this, Hefner quotes approvingly some insights from Islamic tradition:

Some Islamic scholars speak of all of nature as *muslim,* that is, as being within the fundamental structures operating as God created and intended; human free will is to extend this natural *islam* by volition in a way that nature cannot [citations]. Nature and the Qur’an thus bear the same message [citation]. The notion of human kinship with the rest of nature is suggested in the words of a contemporary Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

In fact man is the channel of grace for nature; through his active participation in the spiritual world he casts light into the world of nature. … Man sees in nature what he is himself and penetrates into the inner meaning of nature only on the condition of being able to delve into the inner depths of his own being and to cease to live merely on the periphery of his being. Men who live only on the surface of their being can study nature as something to be manipulated and dominated. But only he who has turned toward the inward dimension of his being can see nature as a symbol, as a transparent reality and come to know and understand it in the real sense. {Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature,* 96} (*HF,* 71)

Hefner then continues by discussing Christian correlates to Nasr’s statement:

The second chapter of Genesis pictures the human being in terms of dust that has received the spirit or breath of God. A substantial segment of the Christian tradition has taken this as a model for conceiving of God’s work throughout the natural realm. Sacraments have been defined as natural things with the addition of the spirit or promise of God. One may read from this definition in either direction: that human being is the paradigm for conceiving how God is present throughout nature and history, or that humans fit under the sacramental paradigm that applies to all of nature. Christian understandings of the Holy Spirit have often moved in the same direction. The Spirit hovers over the waters at creation, just as it gives life to the desert plants and animals, raises up charismatic leaders, accompanies the birth of the Savior, and is poured out upon the entire community.

Although these traditions still lack precise conceptual expression, they do predispose us to receive the scientific suggestions that *Homo sapiens* is to be understood as part of nature’s process, not only ecologically, but in terms of kinship with all that has appeared within the processes of nature’s evolution.

Drawing out the significance of these statements, Hefner continues:

The Islamic sense that nature represents the words or *logoi* of God — that there is a “parallel (or even identity) between the revelation of the Qur’an and the creation of the universe” [note, in Hefner’s choice of words, the connection with Greek Orthodox traditions about creation as a manifestation of innumerable *logoi,* words, spoken by the Divine *Logos,* the Word of God {BB}] — may serve to characterize our situation today with respect to how humans are intended to relate to the rest of nature. The sciences bear nature’s message that we literally stand in kin-relationship, in terms of our origins, to all living things. Put in non-religious terms, our deficiency lies in our inability to understand either the fundamental indicative or imperative of that message. We are unable to relate that message to the most basic values of human life. In religious terms, our deficit lies in the fact that we cannot represent to ourselves how the scientific message of our kinship with nature can qualify as the logos, the word, of God.

The challenge to our discernment is clear. To understand our kinship with nature, that we are part of nature’s process and that our niche is within that process, and to discern the fundamental significance of that kinship would be to make both a constructive and a prophetic contribution to the soul and mind of our culture that is painfully needed. Such discernment would be constructive, because it would at least set the stage for thinking through some of the greatest dilemmas that face us. It would be healing to a culture whose political confusion and social trauma are exacerbated because it is not certain why its spirit hurts. Such discernment would be prophetic, because it unmasks the ignorance and arro-gance that reinforce our unwillingness to see our niche as part of nature’s process. (*HF,* 71-2)

Finally, outlining a positive proposal to address these challenges, Hefner develops four theses about “Knowledge that Serves Life.” I will list the theses without their attendant discussion; and then, by way of indicating their significance, wrap up with Hefner’s conclusion.

1. This knowledge will have to teach us how to talk about ourselves as intrinsically part of the processes of nature.
2. We must understand that what we are, what we do, and what we aim for as humans is to be referred to the processes of nature and to their future.
3. We must recognize that, in light of our status as a phase of nature’s processes, our niche can also be understood as one of preparing for the best possible future for those processes.
4. We must learn how to discern the dimension of ultimacy in nature’s processes and how to conceptualize them.

Hefner’s conclusion:

In the Western religious traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the creation of the natural order is the greatest project toward which the divine creativity and energies have been expended, so far as human knowledge can ascertain. These processes are intricate and marvelous. They are, apparently, what God wants to do. And redemption of all sorts is, after all, another — perhaps the humanly most significant — large outpouring of divine energy and intentionality toward the natural order.

If nature is God’s great project, then by devoting ourselves to its care and redemption we are pouring our resources into the same effort that God has poured divine resources into. Can we learn to think such thoughts, articulate them in words, and permit them to guide our action?

Paraphrasing Nasr, I would propose that the challenge facing us is first of all to recognize that the study of nature and the discoveries that we achieve from that study are a form of theological enterprise. Secondly, when that study and discovery are turned to an examination of human viability, that is, the question of the human niche, they touch upon questions that literally pertain to our being or nonbeing, and thus are directly theological. The message or communication that we receive from nature is parallel to the communication that we receive from our canonical Sacred Scripture. This parallelism, of course, is conveyed in part by the image of the Two Books, an image that is several centuries old in the West, figuring in an important way, for example, in the founding of the Royal Society of London in 1660.

The significance of this image for our present cultural situation, however, is far from being appreciated in its depth. Briefly put, the challenge to the sciences and the critical reason that builds upon the sciences is to recognize that the knowledge attained by scientific research forms the matrix and the substance for some of humanity’s most fundamental values. We would do well to recognize that when devoted to these questions, the sciences are dealing with issues of ultimacy. Such an awareness will have great impact on how we perceive some of the questions now under discussion, of which perhaps the definition and exploration of *survival* is the most central.

For the religious communities and their theologians, the challenge is to recognize that because the natural world is indeed God’s greatest project, true and profound knowledge of God involves the attempt to discern what niche or niches are most fitting for *Homo sapiens.* For theology, this entails the conclusion that theology is not on track unless it can interpret the traditions of the religious communities as revelation about the natural order. (Again, we understand the natural order always to include human beings and their culture.) This leads directly to the sense that the spiritual life has not been properly understood nor has God been rightly obeyed, therefore, until the believing community pours the quality of effort into the processes of nature and their future that parallels what God has committed to those processes. (*HF,* 71-5, in Chapter 4, “Nature as God’s Great Project”)

**Right Relationship: Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” Updated & Revised**

Hefner’s figure of the created co-creator brings theology/church practice and “the critical reason that builds upon the sciences” into fruitful synergy. In that same vein, Peter Brown and Geoffrey Garver offer an ethical principle as a heuristic tool to help religious communities discern their proper human niche and to act responsibly “to birth the future that is most whole-some for the nature that has birthed us.” Writing as Quakers trained in science and public policy, their book *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009) serves as an extended discussion of a fundamental ethical principle received from Aldo Leopold, commonly known as the “Land Ethic.” Here is their account of the principle:

In this book we expand the term “right relationship” from its early Quaker use to give it a more universal meaning that includes contemporary science and has roots in diverse cultural and religious traditions. Right relationship provides a guiding ethic for people wishing to lead fulfilling lives as creative and integrated participants in human society and the commonwealth of life as a whole. It is akin to what some would call “sustainability,” thought it goes much deeper. Right relationship offers a guidance systems for functioning in harmony with scientific reality and enduring ethical traditions.

In the 1940s, conservation biologist Aldo Leopold, reflecting on what he had come to see as the next stage in human moral development, created a useful definition of right relationship. When working out what he called the land ethic, he explained that “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Many volumes have been written on the philosophy of ecology, but this simple statement has become the touchstone of the ecological worldview. Leopold’s ethic gains strength when enhanced with affirmations of the inherent value of human and other life, as exemplified in Albert Schweitzer’s powerful idea of “reverence for life.”

Replacing the term “stability” with “resilience” reflects the current scientific understanding of relationships. Leopold’s ethic applies, as well, to the integrity, resilience, and beauty of human communities. How the ethic is understood in practice depends, of course, on the type of community. Hence, with only one alteration, his ethic becomes a practical guide for differentiating between right and wrong relationship both in human society and in the entire community of life of which humans are a part: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the commonwealth of life. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

It is quite possible to choose right relationships and the common good. Many individuals are already doing so, as are many communities and a few societies. The problem the world is currently facing, however, is that in most of our modern societies the majority of people are actively urged, even forced, to choose wrong relationship, such as those typified by the Alberta tar sands project. Greed and the constant stimulation of new desires that feed it, until quite recently regarded in most societies as sinful or at least unpleasant, have increasingly become acceptable, even glorified. Simultaneously, modern industrial activity has embraced a pathological gigantism, increasing corporate consolidations and ruthlessly crushing the small-business players, as well as the natural systems on which all economic activity depends.

In short, pursuit of wrong relationships is the prevailing trend of our times. The signs are now well known: climate change, over-population, loss of topsoil and fresh water, increasing rates of species extinction, deforestation, imperiled coral reefs, unstoppable invasive species, toxic chemicals that remain for eons in the environment, persistent human poverty and hunger, and an increasingly inflated, unstable world financial system and globalizing economy. And we only begin the list.

Right relationship with life and the world is both a personal and a collective choice, but it is a choice that we must make. It can support and inspire people struggling to find a foundational base for the development of productive societies and a health human-earth relationship. Opting for healthy human and ecological communities is a decision we can make that will require us to find new ways to live and to run our economies. Of course, “right relationship” is simply another way of expressing similar precepts found in many of the world’s religious and spiritual traditions. The reductionist science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed ethical ideas by removing, for many people, their theological foundations. Now, the relationship science of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is beginning to change human perceptions of reality, particularly in terms of human duties to other life forms with which we share life’s prospect. (*RR,* 4-6)

Understanding the term “commonwealth” used in the revised land ethic statement will benefit from some explanation. Brown & Garver write:

The traditional idea of a commonwealth stresses the shared features of the community and interdependence of its members. For people, relationships with other humans or with natural communities bring in notions of mutual respect and fairness that are reflected, for example, in universally recognized moral principles like the Golden Rule. The common-wealth of life extends these notions of common features, fair sharing, and interdependence to the entire community of living beings on the earth. The “common wealth” in this community of life on the earth is now clearly the evolutionary heritage and destiny that people share with other life forms. A whole earth economy works for *all* of life’s common-wealth. Hence the subtitle of this book.

Nearly all of life on earth has been made possible by the power of the sun, which over eons has fueled the creation of living structures of increasing complexity and interdepen-dence. These range from single-cell organisms to elephant, honeybee, or human societies, as well as the intertwined communities of plants, animals, insects, and other biota that constitute a forest. In the commonwealth of all life, the actions of each individual member or species affect the entire commonwealth, however small the result might be. We human beings are now in a position to have a far greater impact on the commonwealth of life than most of the other life forms with which we share the planet. Therefore we have the responsibility and privilege to consider other beings and ecosystems when we engage in any sort of social action, including an economy. Our actions must embody an ethic of appreciating, husbanding, and sharing the earth’s bounty. (*RR,* 6-7)

Any serious effort to act responsibly in accord with the land ethic leads swiftly to the matter of rights for the whole Earth community. Just as human economies and cultures work best when human rights are respected and protected by law, so our efforts to promote the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the commonwealth of life must — in order to be effective — be supported by respect for the rights of all entities in the commonwealth, and protected by recognition of these rights through legislation, jurisprudence, and sanctions of coercive force. For a compelling exploration of these issues, see Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice,* 2nd ed. (Chelsea Green, 2011). See also the attached PDF file, “Rights of Earth Community,” which contains a brief reflection on earth rights by Thomas Berry, as well as the “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.”

Brown & Garver do not use the words “redemption” or “redemptive” in explaining their revised land ethic. Arguably, however, that is their intent in offering this ethical principle as a guide for discernment, action, and social change. Earth’s interdependent commonwealth of life flourished for inconceivably long eons prior to the advent of the human, evolving constantly into the complex, resilient, and beautiful natural world that gave birth to the human. But now the human, mired in the ideological, political, and economic morass of wrong relationship, has put all of this at risk. Surely redemption is called for, because as Hefner suggests, we are dealing now with issues of ultimacy, of which the survival of life on earth is the most central.

The revised land ethic, entailing the matter of rights for the whole commonwealth of life, offers a practical starting point to guide the believing community in discerning its redemptive task: to reclaim its proper niche of right relationship within the earth community, to determine what actions are fitting and good, so as to restore the complexity, integrity, resilience, and beauty of life on earth that was everywhere evident at the dawn of the human era — thus birthing a future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us. We have the privilege of doing so not only as concerned citizens of the global *oikumene* hoping to re-establish ecological balance, but more particularly as the Body of Christ spiritually called to accept our nature and destiny as created co-creators enjoined by the Word of God to develop the “knowledge that serves life” so that we may participate freely in the intentional fulfillment of God’s purposes to bring *ta panta* to its final consummation — to the praise of God’s glory.

**Creationtide: An Interpretive Model of Care for Creation**

I have developed a typology of themes and metaphors to organize the Christian life as Care for Creation. I have called this scheme “Creationtide,” after the title sometimes used to name a liturgical “season of creation.” In reading the material below, it will become clear that it draws upon, summarizes, and represents the Lutheran-Irenaean theological traditions outlined above in such a way that they can be made available to shape the practice and discourse of the Body of Christ. The scheme has been used to carry out seasons of creation at churches in the Portland area (e.g., Central-Portland, Mission of the Atonement, and Cedar Hills Christian Church).

Creationtide is as an interpretive model offering a spacious framework for worship planning, preaching, and congregational ministry. I believe it conserves the core claims, values, and practices of the great Christian tradition. At the same time, it adapts the tradition to engage Christian responsibility amidst our current culture so profoundly shaped not only by late-modern globalizing consumerist political economies, but also by the “universe story” and the emergent ecological world view currently orienting the various physical and life sciences. Such conservation and adaptation are needed if the Church is to continue preaching credibly and living hopefully as an expression of God’s love while humanity organizes to develop a new relationship with the earth community — a relationship sustainable within the ancient and ever-renewing patterns of God’s creativity governing the evolving life of Planet Earth.

The four themes of Creationtide symbolize the holy love, spiritual powers, divine attributes, and sacred value that God brings into the relationship of Creator with creation. The four themes together tell the great story of how God loves and cares for creation.

Human care for creation imitates, reflects, and assists God’s care for creation. As God loves and cares for creation to bring it to fulfillment, so humans also love and care for creation and help to bring about the fulfillment of God’s creation. Human beings, created in God’s image, care for creation appropriately when they imitate God and Christ in using these four themes to organize the Christian life. Thus, they serve as “created co-creators” assisting in the management and fulfillment of God’s plan for creation.

1. The Four Themes Explained: *God’s Love & Care for Creation*
   1. *Beholding Creation* God beholds the whole creation; sees it, values it, treasures it, blesses it, and delights in the divine handiwork. This beholding fills creation with sacred goodness and intrinsic value — that is to say, creation holds a value for God which supersedes the various values creatures may hold for themselves or one another. God sees creation as a whole: as it was, is, and will be; and sees the goal of holy fulfillment that is inherent in creation’s blessed beginning. God also beholds the evil powers that stand in the way of God’s purposes in creation; and generates remediation of these evil powers within the unfolding plan.
   2. *Befriending Creation* God befriends creation by entering personally into relationship with creation to promote its thriving. God’s boundless creative power evokes the evolutionary emergence of increasingly diverse, complex, fecund, resilient, and sentient expressions of community through all levels of creation. All creatures in their ecological contexts serve as mirrors of the divine presence that fills creation. Holy communion is the emergent spiritual reality in God’s engagement with the community of creation. God increasingly reveals the whole creation as a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.
   3. *Reclaiming Creation* Just as the ill influence of sin and evil in creation is a core claim of biblical faith, the Bible also testifies that when powers of evil attempt to seize control of creation, God intervenes repeatedly to reclaim creation and restore it to right relationship, that is, to serve God’s plan and purpose, instead of remaining in bondage to powers of evil. God’s reclaiming of creation is typically reflected in stories of destruction and new creation: e.g., Noah and the flood; Israel’s exile from and return to the land. In the New Testament, the events of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, are the paradigmatic expression of God’s reclaiming creation. The cross of Jesus Christ and the pathos of the prophetic vocation define God’s determination to reclaim creation for serving God’s purposes.
   4. *Fulfilling Creation* The goal of God’s creation-project is the universal revelation of the glory of God. God’s determination to bring the divine purpose to fulfillment not only fills all creation with the glory of God; it also generates creaturely responses of thanksgiving, praise, blessings, and celebration throughout the whole creation by way of magnifying God’s glory. Both in the Old and New Testaments, themes of a new heaven, new earth, and new creation symbolize and define God’s power of fulfilling creation in a cosmic liturgy of praise to the glory of God. This *telos* orients and defines the whole emergent process of God’s creation from beginning to end.
2. The Four Themes for Church Practice: *Human Imitation of God’s Love & Care for Creation*
   1. *Beholding Creation* Humans behold God’s creation; and by grace are granted awareness of divine presence in creation; so humans, practicing presence to and awareness of creation in both its splendor and travail, grow to value, treasure, bless, and delight in God’s handiwork; and respond to God’s disclosure of holy presence in creation with awe, wonder, reverence, piety. Because it evokes respect for the sacred value of creation, this revelation God’s awesome presence in the midst of creation is the foundation of care for creation.
   2. *Befriending Creation* Humans enter into relationships of mutual enhancement with creation to promote thriving in diverse, complex, expressions of earth community. Gen. 2:15 – which portrays the human as a gardener ordered to serve and preserve the garden – exemplifies the human as a befriender of creation. Caring for ecosystems and their creatures to serve and preserve the vitality of these living systems (including their human presence) becomes one basic spiritual discipline for creation care; and one in which humans also are instructed by the deep wisdom of God that orders all created systems. Adaptive self-limitation to reduce the human’s ecological footprint is a related spiritual discipline. In presence to and care for the living systems that make up the human’s home, they come to embrace creation as a holy communion of subjects to love and enjoy instead of a collection of objects to exploit. By God’s self-giving disclosure, creation in all its complexity is revealed for sharing as something like a sacrament; that is, a means of grace.
   3. *Reclaiming Creation* Given the ill influence that powers of evil exert within God’s creation, humans called by God act to reclaim creation so that it can serve God’s purposes instead of remaining in bondage to the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). Reclaiming has three broad modes of expression: (1) working to stop annihilation of creatures and the devastation of their habitats; (2) working to reform mediating institutions (e.g., of law and government; commerce; education; and institutional religion) or to create new institutions in order to embody a mutually beneficial, indefinitely sustainable human-earth presence; and (3) undertaking spiritual transformation, both personal and corporate, that supports the ongoing engagement to serve and preserve creation. Because such transformative projects challenge powerful interests who reap vast economic benefits from current arrangements, the spiritual discipline of re-claiming creation would, in practice, give rise to the pathos of the prophetic vocation: suffering for the sake of discipleship in following Christ. Thus, we have occasion to rely on Lutheran traditions articulating a theology of the cross, where God is well-known in the midst of suffering and Christ’s presence even there serves a redemptive function by empowering ongoing trust, courage, loyalty, perseverance in the face of withering oppression, and love despite bitter hatred — all so that God’s reign may come quickly and God’s name be glorified. We will suffer, if necessary, to serve and preserve the integrity of God’s creation that we have been led to treasure; we risk our lives to save what we love. In such dying and rising, we ourselves are reclaimed and transformed so we can live renewed in the image and likeness of God.
   4. *Fulfilling Creation* Humans help to fulfill creation when they offer God glory and praise in ways most fitting for creatures made in God’s image. The uniquely human aspect of fulfilling creation lies in its orientation toward comprehending the wholeness of the universe, summing up the entirety of nature’s praise, and offering it to God in a mode of self-reflective awareness supporting a depth of understanding, wonder, awe, and joy in holistic communion that is, it seems, shared by no other creature. The vocation of the human to care for creation, therefore, realizes its ultimate value in two ways. First, through protecting and promoting the capacity of non-human nature to offer its proper praise to God; the farthest horizon of which lies in awakening the whole creation to the supreme blessedness of its own spiritual communion with God in the risen, cosmic Christ. The second is found in the human’s capacity to augment nature’s praise at an expanded order of complexity by adding a comprehensive, reflective appreciation of the doxological whole. Thus, God’s intention for creation is fulfilled in all creation’s praise of God. The human has a unique role — and high destiny — in its calling to partner with God as co-creators bringing about this fulfillment in cosmic liturgy. This high destiny, received in faith, is rehearsed and realized in an incipient, partial way in every worship service, and daily in every act of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer to honor and celebrate God.
3. Spiritual Power to Care for Creation. Caring for creation is challenging. In the face of stiff resistance, caring for creation calls forth our best spiritual discipline and self-giving for the sake of healing the world. Here, it’s helpful to recall St. Augustine’s dictum: “O God, command what you will; but give what you command.” Because humans are creatures made in the image of God, we are meant to receive spiritual powers to sustain our capacity to care for creation. Members of the body of Christ receive Christ both as God’s favor and as God’s gift; and so are imbued with the benefits of Christ’s spiritual powers supporting our care for creation. Naming these spiritual powers of beholding, befriending, reclaiming, and fulfilling creation is one way to symbolize and summarize the help God gives to sustain the faithful in their vocation. What we love, we will save. Only the power of God’s love can form, transform, and sustain us in co-creating the Reign of God for the care, redemption, and consummation of all that God is making.
4. Sanctification: Full Maturity in Christ & Ruling with Christ in Glory. Creationtide portrays the Christian life as discipleship in imitation of Christ. Care for creation thus functions as a spiritual discipline through which God’s sanctifying grace forms people for full maturity in Christ (“to the measure of the full stature of Christ,” Eph. 4:13). The practices and interpretation involved in caring for creation serve as processes where the living water of God’s holy love is poured into the human heart; where character is formed, wisdom discerned, and identity transformed. In the energies and practices of beholding, befriending, reclaiming, and fulfilling creation, humans are turned increasingly toward serving the good of the other – indeed, toward the good of all others in creation. In practicing faith active in love for the sake of all neighbors in creation, humans are continually turned away from preoccupation with egocentric personal gratification, anthropocentric chauvinism, and anxious self-justification. Likewise, in faith they receive Christ and become conformed to Christ more and more as they engage the ongoing disciplines of care for creation. Within God’s economy of creation, guided by the ministry of the church, this personal and spiritual growth is oriented toward embodiment of full maturity in Christ while serving with Christ in managing creation’s emergence toward its proper fulfillment in holy love and cosmic celebration to the glory of God. In this earthly life, as in whatever resurrection may follow, to care for creation according to the aims and values portrayed in the Creationtide model is already to begin ruling with Christ in glory. Christian tradition, in its Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran expressions, has called this “theosis” or “deification.” This transformation, brought about by God’s power and faithful resolve to bring humankind to fulfillment, is the ultimate horizon of maturity in Christ and the true meaning of human dominion within the epic grandeur of God’s creation.
5. The Two Spirals: illustrating the spiritual challenge of caring for creation.

*The* *Creation Care Spiral —*  and its evil twin, *The* *Creation Death Spiral*

Imagine these two figures as dynamic spirals. On the left, the *Creation Care Spiral* moves clockwise in expanding circles signifying the increasing vitality of complex living systems and a concomitant expansion in capacity to praise God’s glory. On the right, the *Creation Death Spiral* moves counter-clockwise in diminishing circles signifying the decreasing vitality and complexity of living systems with a concomitant decline in capacity to give glory to God. The categories of the two spirals are dynamic nexuses in constant tension with their countervailing antipodes. Opposed to “Beholding Creation,” the *Creation Death Spiral* has “Prospecting Creation” — seeing only parts instead of the whole, with tunnel vision focused on the parts’ instrumental value for human use instead of on the intrinsic value they yield to God. The other moments of the *Death Spiral* follow accordingly. Opposed to “Befriending Creation,” there is “Exploiting Creation” — extracting use-values from the parts. Opposed to “Reclaiming Creation” for God’s purposes, there is “Collapsing Creation” for human purposes. Finally, opposed to “Fulfilling Creation” there is “Evacuating Creation” when collapse becomes so advanced that the system no longer offers sufficient use-value for human purposes. The *Creation Death Spiral,* as an accelerating feedback loop, terminates in a singularity, a symbolic black hole that nullifies creation’s capacity to glorify God. By contrast, the *Creation Care Spiral* expands indefinitely within a series of emergent natural systems fulfilling God’s purpose to embody ongoing cosmic liturgy of celebration and glory to God. These two contrasting spirals symbolize the countervailing dynamics of creation/anti-creation, and reflect the struggle of God and God’s people against cosmic powers of evil — a struggle which, biblically, affects not only the spiritual experience of Christians, but shapes the functioning of the whole Earth community. These opposing spirals can be used to interpret a variety of materials from scripture and tradition. For example, they are applicable to the Lutheran insight that Christians individually and corporately are always *simul iustus et peccator,* as well as to interpret biblical symbolism of the paradoxical tension between the realm of darkness and God’s reign of light (cf., e.g., Ephesians, Colossians). The two spirals are likewise useful to interpret the drama of creation’s bondage and liberation proclaimed by St. Paul in Romans 8. The point is that the spiritual aspirations of Christians for righteousness and final blessedness must not be conceived and pursued as if they were separate from the fulfillment of the whole creation according to God’s universal economy of salvation. The spiritual responsibility of humans in regard to the future of God’s creation and their own final good as part of God’s creation are woven in one seamless garment of divine destiny promised, ordered, and brought to completion by the power of God’s gracious love.

**Conclusion: Cosmic Metanoia**

Consider the words of Metropoltian Kallistos of Diokleia:

Generosity and unselfishness render the world transparent, turning all things into a sacrament of communion with one another and with God. Here precisely we touch upon a crucial aspect of our cosmic *metanoia*. Let us not for one moment imagine that the ecological crisis can be resolved simply through sentimental expressions of regret. What is asked from us is costly self-discipline, sacrificial forbearance, an inner martyrdom — in a word, Cross-bearing. …The renewal of the planet Earth and the ecological salvation of the human race can come about in one way and in one way only: through the Tree of the Cross. Only through Cross-bearing, through the denial of our selfishness, through what the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil calls “life-creating death” shall we be able to rediscover the wonder and beauty of the world. What is needed, to quote the late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, is a “Eucharistic and ascetic spirit,” a spirit of thankful and self-denying love. (Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, “Through Creation to the Creator,” in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* [Fordham University Press, 2013], 103-105.)

Pondering the texts for *Preaching in the Biocommons,* we should keep Kallistos’ words in mind. That we need cosmic *metanoia* is an inconvenient truth. We want to deny it — but we cannot if we are to abide in God’s truth and live accordingly. It has become painfully obvious that if the world continues under the yoke of the Industrial Growth Society, we will precipitate the end of life as we know it on planet Earth. We need cosmic *metanoia* that transforms every aspect of human culture and daily life if we are to eat, breathe, and enjoy community — with a tolerable measure of justice and peace — embracing all beings in Earth’s ancient, self-organizing rhythms of life. As pastors, our *metanoia* must proceed by discarding theologies that keep us stuck in the rut leading to global perdition. This can be accomplished only by engaging, comprehending, cultivating, and inculturating a cosmic theological imagination and a comprehensive ethical framework adequate to the scope and urgency of the unprecedented challenges we face. This theology and ethics must help us, by God’s grace, to tell painful truths about the sacrificial *metanoia* needed for the human to survive and thrive with the whole Earth community. Since such truth-telling will bring us the cross of suffering for the sake of discipleship, our theology must also, therefore, help us bear the cross of ecological redemption, undergo a life-creating death, wherein we may embrace our status as God’s created co-creators who serve life instead of death, who participate eagerly in the intentional fulfillment of God’s purposes by helping to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us. This would signal a new Reformation indeed. May the reverent wonder, holy friendship, prophetic madness, and transfiguring glory that are gifts of God’s Spirit enlighten and empower us in this calling.