

Overview of the Series

Introduction

In the early 16th century, Hieronymus Bosch painted a triptych that is both powerful and perplexing. Using oil paint and oak, Bosch imagined what is known as *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

When the wings of this triptych are closed, the viewer sees God creating the world. The scene is painted in grisaille, a technique that



Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1490-1510) Hieronymus Bosch, Museo del Prado

renders a scene entirely in one color. This lack of contrasting colors gives the creation story an eerie otherness. God, the Father, sits in the upper right hand corner with a bible (the creative Word) in his lap. From that word comes a world. The world is huge and yet delicate, a semi-transparent sphere suspended in darkness. It is separate from God and yet governed by him as one watches creation unfold. It is the third day.

Upon opening this triptych, however, the viewer is overwhelmed with vibrant color and artistic imagination. With this power comes perplexity. The interior scenes are disturbing. Reading the panels from left to right, one begins with the creation of Adam and Eve. Here, God is present and active in his wonderful creation. The central panel depicts a world without God. The scene is filled with realistic and imagined figures engrossed in sexual and physical delights. The final panel depicts a world condemned. It is a hellish landscape, with the remnants of civilization in a city at the top and then a movement from imagined to very real tortures and death at the bottom.



Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1490-1510) Hieronymus Bosch, Museo del Prado

This imaginative journey is as powerful as it is perplexing. Bosch takes his viewers from a rather plain and placid depiction of creation to a powerful explosion of action and wonder, both beautiful and perverse. Consider the contrast: the story of creation is eerie and other and intentionally plain; open its doors, however, and one finds in the center a world filled with delight. That world is without God and, for many viewers, without any clear meaning, but it remains framed by the memory of creation (left panel) and the anticipation of judgment (right panel).

In some ways, Bosch's painting captures our 21st century experience of ecological awareness. For most Christians, the story of creation is simple and plain. It may come as a childhood memory or as a passing encounter with Genesis in an adult instruction class, but it is not explored in any great detail. It pictures God and the world but it lacks the depth and complexity of scientific discovery and secular imagination. When Christians pass through that story into the world, they find themselves overwhelmed with an explosion of debate in ecological conversations. Sometimes the visions are beautiful and other times they are perverse. Sadly, the unformed Christian imagination only faintly remembers the past (God's creation of the world) and fearfully anticipates the future (where God delivers our souls from hellfire and damnation into a heavenly realm). Such an unformed and uninformed Christian vision makes it very difficult to find meaning in the present world. When one speaks about Christians and creation, one immediately thinks of arguments against evolution rather than the fullness and the wonder of the biblical witness or the fullness and wonder of the Christian life.

Historically, the triptych was a form often associated with religious devotion. Although Bosch paints in this form, art historians doubt whether this painting ever graced the altar of a church. Its imagery is too perplexing and disturbing. One wonders, however, if the church were to produce a triptych relating to creation, what would it look like? What kind of art would lead God's people into the depth and the wonder of his creation, care, and recreation of the world?

The Sermon Series

In constructing this sermon series, I commissioned an artist to answer that question. Lutheran pastor, Karl Fay, is the artist and his triptych provides the visual imagery for this series. You can read Fay's description of his work and we will reference it throughout the series. The images are also available for you to use for bulletin covers or visual display. Right now, I would like to highlight the scale of his work. Fay's work is not designed to grace the altar of a church. It is smaller than that. Although he uses the triptych form, he scales his work for art that would be found within a home. Consider what that means. Fay's work suggests that our worship of God extends out of the congregation and into the world, in our care for the created world God has given us as our home.

The sermons series, itself, is a triptych: a triptych that opens the pages of Scripture and explores the wonder of creation.



Enfolded Exterior

The opening panel is of the risen Christ, ascended into heaven and ruling at his Father's right hand. What you see in this image is that Jesus is the Second Adam. God has placed all things under his feet. He was there at the first creation and he now rules over creation itself until he returns and brings about the restoration of all things. As we engage in care for creation, we are living in the rule of Christ, the Second Adam, awaiting the restoration of all creation and the full fruition of eternal life in him. This is the image that opens this sermon series: Christ, the Second Adam, who rules over all creation.



Enfolded Interior Panel 1

The rest of the sermons in this series will open that image and explore what it means for Christians to believe that Christ rules over all things. In Bosch's triptych when the story of creation is opened, it leads the viewer into an explosion of color and life. In this sermon series, as God's people explore what it means to confess that Jesus rules over creation, they experience an explosion of color and life as they encounter this world. The first panel explores the experience of delight in creation. God has surrounded us with a created world that continuously sings his praise. The biblical witness opens our eyes to see God's delight in creation and creation's delight in God. In this sermon, God's people will learn to join creation's praise.



Enfolded Interior Panel 2

The middle panel explores what it means to be part of the community of creation. Human culture has often been set in opposition to the natural world. In Revelation, however, as God gives John a vision of the throne in heaven, John sees that both creation (Rev. 5:11-14) and culture (Rev. 7:9-12) gather before the throne of God to sing. In anticipation of that day, God

has made a covenant with both his human creatures and all living creatures (Gen. 9:1-17). This sermon will examine that covenant and the complexity of life that it describes. We are to live in community with all creation, caring for all living creatures and yet receiving from God's hand living creatures for our sustenance. This good design of God creates a life of caring consumption that will be the subject of the sermon.





Enfolded Interior Panel 3

The last panel explores what it means for Christians to listen to God's word and live in hope of Christ's return. Ecological engagement can be exhausting and, at times, dispiriting. If your congregation has engaged in ecological initiatives during this sermon series, this sermon encourages God's people to continue in such work. It asks that they approach these things not as temporary programs, quick fixes to lasting problems, but as a way of life in the kingdom where we anxiously await Christ's return, looking forward to his recreation and restoration of all things. Whereas Bosch's triptych suggests a world framed by a faint memory of creation and fearful anticipation of final judgment, this final sermon will guide Christians in ecological conversations that are framed by a firm sense of the past (God's original creation and our fall into sin) and a faithful vision of the future (Christ's return and restoration of his people as he recreates all things). Knowing the past, God's people repent for sin that has destroyed creation; knowing the future, God's people live in hope of God's final recreation and restoration. Thus, we enter the world and ecological conversations in repentant hope. We are honest and forthright about the sinful abuse of God's creation and yet we are also confident and filled with hope as our faithful action embodies the first fruits that forecast that final day.

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Concluding Thoughts

Thank you for considering use of this sermon series. Now is truly the time. Our culture has experienced a renaissance in ecological awareness. From your neighbor who weekly sets a recycling bin at the curb to your community that gathers every year for Earth Day in a public park, people are engaged in ecological conversation and action. Unfortunately, the church seems to have lost its voice. Like Bosch's monochromatic vision of creation, the church's story seems devoid of life. Ever since Lynn White's famous address to the American Academy for the Advancement of Science in 1966, ¹ the church has been seen as the cause of much ecological destruction. Some see the church devaluing creation, as Christians proclaim that humans are meant to dominate the world and master its resources for their use. Others see the church treating creation with careless disregard, as Christians tell how God has saved their souls (not their bodies) and will ultimately take them from this world to live with him in heaven. Unfortunately, such readings are not faithful to the biblical witness.

When the pages of Scripture are opened and the biblical witness is explored, God offer his people a vibrant and beautiful confession of faith and way of life in his world. Unfortunately, often our conversation never leaves the first chapter of Genesis and the voice of the church is only heard in the context of a creation/evolution debate. This sermon series seeks to explore other aspects of the biblical witness to creation. If you are looking for a sermon on the

creation/evolution debate, you will not find it here. This is not because that debate is not important or that Christian faith does not have a witness but rather because the Christian witness is so much more than the limits of that debate. Instead, this series will explore the fuller vision of Scripture as it speaks of creation. Such a witness will correct the errors of our world, its misconceptions of our Christian witness, encourage action, and build bridges within our culture's ecological climate.

While these are all good things, however, ultimately, the real purpose of this series is to confess God's vision of creation. God has given it to us to hear, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest as we grow in the faith. God's vision of creation is a true garden of delights for his people. It helps us redeemed sinners live in the presence of our risen, ruling, and returning Savior who is bringing about the restoration of all things. May God bless your endeavor to share that word with his people.

For each sermon in the series, you will find a brief sermon study and then a full sermon.

Sermon Study:

The sermon study will consider the topic of the sermon within the contexts of biblical theology and ecology and provide suggested readings, hymns, and a collect for the service.

- **Biblical Theology and Ecology:** this section will reflect upon biblical theology in the context of current ecological discussions.

Ecological discourse is vibrant and diverse, ranging from well-funded scientific studies of habitats to unfunded blogs on the personal implementation of green practices. It is impossible to cover all that is being discussed. It is possible, however, to highlight some of the themes that surface within these discussions and then to draw upon the biblical witness that addresses those themes. This section will explore the fundamental biblical orientation toward creation that shapes the church's faithful response in ecological conversation.

- **Sermon Formation:** this section will provide a sense of the content and flow of the sermon. Since it is difficult to preach another person's sermon, this section will identify the focus of the sermon (the main idea) and the function (how this main idea, by grace, will shape the lives of God's faithful people). In addition, you will also find here the proclamation of law (malady) and gospel (means) that lies at the heart of the sermon. By providing a sense of the main content and flow of the sermon, it should be easier to edit and creatively adapt the sermon to suit your needs.

Full Sermon:

You will also receive a full sermon. These sermons represent how one could preach on this topic. They seek to proclaim God's word, his vision of creation, and form God's people, enriching their lives as they delight in creation, discover community, and live in repentant hope. Yet, preaching another person's sermon is like trying to wear another person's clothes. They never quite fit. For that reason, you may adopt the overall flow of the sermon but switch out the stories or you may choose one moment in the sermon and build a sermon of your own around that. Why provide full sermons? Because reading another person's

sermon gives you the opportunity to be spiritually fed and strengthened as you prepare to preach. With the theme, the structure, and the full sermon in hand, my prayer is that you will be equipped to invite God's people to listen to God's word in this creation series and that God will speak through your words to prepare his people for active and contemplative engagement in the wonder of his world.

Bulletin/Newsletter Description:

Is this world just something we pass through? Is Jesus only concerned about your soul? Or does God have a much fuller vision of life for you? *Christ and Creation* explores the wonder of God's creation, teaching us how to live in community with creation, faithfully and responsibly tending to the world God has made and entrusted to our care.

Author Bio



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Dr. David Schmitt

The Rev. Dr. David Schmitt holds the Gregg H. Benidt Memorial Endowed Chair in Homiletics and Literature at Concordia Seminary. The responsibilities of this position involve teaching courses in homiletics and literature and serving as a resource to the church-at-large, through writing, speaking, and conducting workshops and symposia.

Dr. Schmitt joined the faculty in 1995 and has taught courses in preaching, evangelism, pastoral ministry, Christianity and literature, and the devotional life. He serves as Professor of Practical Theology.

Before coming to the seminary, he served as pastor of St. John the Divine in Chicago IL. He earned his M. Div. from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (1988), an MA in English from the University of Illinois (1990), and an MA and a PhD in English from Washington University in St. Louis (2005).

S E C T I O N F O O T N O T E S

1. Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

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