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Seeing Your Savior Anew: Sermon Study



Enfolded (Exterior)

Artist: Karl Fay, 2013

(assets/images/EnfoldedExteriorPrint.jpg)

Biblical Theology and Ecology:

How does the church enter into ecological conversation? How does one begin a sermon series on creation? In both cases, the answer is the same. By recognizing that such a conversation is not new for the church. In fact, the biblical witness is filled with God's people engaged in holy conversation about the care of creation. Such a conversation might be new for our generation, but it is not new for the church.

The very fact that it sounds new for our generation signals our loss of the larger biblical witness. Think of the conversations you have had in church during your lifetime. The discussions in bible class. The sermons on Sunday. The devotional literature God's people use during the week. What topics appear again and again in such conversations? What talk is normalized as appropriate "church talk" through these frequent conversations? Now, turn to the Scriptures. Read through the psalms and the prophets. Listen to God's people in worship, in prophecy, in prayer. Overhear how frequently the language of creation appears in their witness. Our contemporary theological conversations may have made it seem strange to talk about creation but a close reading of Scripture will help us change our speech. We will overhear how God's people speak about creation and do so out of faithful understanding of the rule of God.

This first sermon in the sermon series seeks to recover the language of creation by anchoring it in the rule of Christ over all things. We are accustomed to hearing of Christ as Lord of our lives. We confess our sins and receive forgiveness and know Jesus as the one who takes away our sins. We are also accustomed to hearing of Christ as the Lord of the church. We gather on Sunday to receive absolution, hear the proclamation of the word, receive the sacrament, and delight in the presence of Christ, coming with his gifts. What this sermon seeks to do is recover our confession of Christ as Lord of all. In addition to being Lord of our lives and Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ is the Second Adam who rules over all things. When one confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, conversations of creation become natural in his church. It is the way God's people rejoice in the rule of Christ, confessing that God has given him to the church as the one who rules over all things.

The sermon thus begins in prayer. In deep meditation upon the texts of Scripture and the revelation in those texts that Christ rules over all things. By understanding what it means for Christ to be the Second Adam, we gain an understanding of who we are as God's creatures in the world he created, redeemed, and now rules.

Psalm 8 anchors the sermon in a vision of God's design for the first Adam life in creation. Psalm 8 offers a paradoxical vision of the human creature in relation to God and God's creation. On the one hand, the human creature is astonishingly small. As the psalmist looks upon creation, he observes the heavens, the stars and the moon, the works of God's fingers. Those lights that we can barely see, God has created, touched with his fingers, and put into place. When gazing at the vastness of the heavens, the psalmist sees the smallness of human beings. "What is man that you are mindful of him?" he asks. On the other hand, the human creature is given great authority. The psalmist recalls creation and the fact that God gave the human creature "dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet," and the psalmist goes on to name not only the beasts of the field but the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Thus, the human creature is paradoxically both small and great at the same time. This paradox is by divine design and invites us to live in the tension of a humble authority, a servant's lordship, as we exercise our humble dominion in God's gift of a wondrous world. 1

As with most paradoxes, it is easy to lose sight of this tension, to overemphasize one truth at the expense of the other and thereby fracture and deny God's design. For example, when some see the expanse of the universe, the clusters of galaxies, they argue that humanity is

merely an accident. For them, any claim to human significance is hubris, and reveals how vastly deluded human beings are. Here, overemphasizing our smallness leads some to lose sight of the greatness given by God. For these individuals, humans have no God-given role of dominion in creation and claims to such a role amount to a form of prejudice known as speciesism, elevating the human species over others. ² On the other hand, others can overemphasize the greatness and lose sight of humility. In 1966, medieval historian Lynn White Jr. suggested that the historical roots of the current ecological crisis lay in Christian claims for the dominion of human beings over creation. ³ White's analysis, oft repeated, has fostered an ecological distrust of the Christian worldview. Christianity is seen as asserting dominion of the human creature over all things without an awareness of humanity's limitations. Here, by overemphasizing greatness, the church has lost sight of the smallness of the human creature.

The Christian worldview, however, seeks to articulate the paradoxical vision offered in Psalm 8. The human creature is both small and great at the same time. As we live in this world, we are given a humble glory. We are called to exercise a servant's authority. The human creature is both humble and exalted in relation to God's wonderful creation. Dominion, therefore, involves service of a paradoxical kind.

How does one articulate this paradox, this servant's authority, in God's world? One way is by anchoring our vocation in Christ. We do not exercise authority over creation apart from Christ. Rather, we exercise authority over creation in him and through him.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul offers a vision of Christ that shapes the life of the church in the world. As Paul speaks of the power of God made known in Jesus, Paul proclaims that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of Psalm 8. Though humanity made a mess out of its rule over creation, Christ has come into creation, taken on human form, and borne the suffering and the punishment for the sin of our failed exercise of human authority. Christ has come to know creation intimately. He has taken on human flesh and lived within this world. Christ has suffered the full effects of human sin for us. God, the Father, then raised Jesus up from the dead and seated him in the heavenly realms.

As Paul speaks of this exaltation of Christ in Ephesians 1:22, notice how he quotes from Psalm 8. Paul proclaims that God "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church." With the words "put all things under his feet," Paul reads Psalm 8:6 ("you have put all things under his feet") as fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of God's original design for Adam. Christ embodies the proper human rule over creation. When Christ rose from the dead, he did not discard his human nature. Rather he glorified it. He brought his humanity into heaven and he now sits at the right hand of God and rules over all things. This rule of Christ is nothing other than the exercise of God-given dominion through a servant king. In Christ, one finds that beautiful paradox of humble dominion, exalted service, a rule over creation that understands creation's purpose, God's love, and the human place.

Even more importantly, Paul states that God has given this Christ "as head over all things" to the churches. Consider what that means. Jesus is more than our Savior. He is also the ruler of all creation and has been given as such to the church. Whereas some Christians can enter into ecological discussions with a wrong understanding of human dominion, others can enter

into such discussions without any place for human dominion at all. This passage allows the church to enter into such discussions confessing the rule of Christ and how that rule shapes Christian witness in word and in deed.

Paul's vision of Christ as God's gift to the church offers one way of framing our discussion. Christ has been given to us as the one who rules over creation as God intended such rule. As followers of Christ, therefore, we are brought into a loving rule in creation. We have a humble authority, a servant's glory, that cares for creation as part of the rule of our Lord. We are not lording it over creation, misusing it for our own purposes, and we are not distant from creation, awaiting our release from a material existence. Instead, we enter into creation and begin to serve in the mystery of mastery that has been given to us and taught to us by Christ.

Sermon Formation:

Focus Christ is the Second Adam who rules over creation in love.

Function that the hearers care for creation as an expression of Christ's rule through them.

Malady We have misunderstood our place in God's design, using the dominion God has given us as an exercise of power rather than an expression of care for creation that it might flourish.

Means Christ entered into creation and bore in his body the wrath of God for our sinful misuse of dominion. In his resurrection, he is the Second Adam, who now rules over all things as God desires and includes us in that gracious rule.

Structure the sermon is structured on the basis of contrast. **4** It opens with the idea of meditating on a verse from a psalm and discovering the wonder of God's word breaking forth in our lives.

The sermon then contrasts two different ways of meditating on a verse from Psalm 8: an inappropriate reading of "you placed all things under his feet" (where we use this verse to claim power over creation in an act of authoritarian rule) and Paul's reading of Psalm 8 (where we see Christ as the Second Adam who rules over creation with compassionate care).

At the heart of the sermon is the image of Christ as the Second Adam, based on Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:22 and depicted in the opening image of the triptych for this sermon series.

SECTION FOOTNOTES

1. For a theological elaboration on our humble dominion, see Charles Arand's work in *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth*. A Report of the Commission of Theology and Church Relations. The Lutheran Church "Missouri Synod (St. Louis: CPH, 2010), 39-54.
2. See Richard D. Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes toward Speciesism* (New York: Berg, 2000).
3. See Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.
4. For a description of this structure, see the information posted on this sermon structure located at *The Pulpit* on concordiatheology.org. See <http://concordiatheology.org/sermon-structs/thematic/comparisoncontrast/> (<http://concordiatheology.org/sermon-structs/thematic/comparisoncontrast/>).