

The Glory Robe of God

A CONVERSATION WITH
SCOTT HOE ZEE

With rich biblical images of creation and the new creation in Christ, pastor Scott Hoezee came to understand his own joy in tramping through wetlands, bird watching, cross-country skiing, and snorkeling over coral reefs. Now he summons his congregation to delight in and care for creation as “the glory robe of God.”

Why have some Christians been slow to respond to environmental damage, whether it is planet-wide problems of ozone depletion and desertification of farmland, or the threats to health and safety of life-forms in our local communities? Perhaps we are sitting on the sidelines, suggests pastor and author Scott Hoezee, because we fail to delight in the environment as God’s creation.

Hoezee (pronounced “hoe-ZAY”), Minister of Preaching and Administration at Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI, talked with me about his love for the Gospel and childhood delight in the creation, and how he connected these together first in his sermons and then in his book, *Remember Creation: God’s World of Wonder and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

Environmental organizations help us to grasp the problems that we face, though sometimes they espouse a “religious stew” as they combine uncritically the diverse faith traditions of their members. Christians should respond to this “Babel of confusion” about why to care for the environment, says Hoezee, by remembering the rich biblical images of creation and of the new creation in Christ: “What motivates a love of nature is that it is not finally ‘nature’ at all! It is creation, it is God’s work. As such it bears the stamp of his glory, it praises him in all its manifold diversity, and

it has received and continues to receive his divine benediction” (*Remember Creation*, p. 88).

Bob Kruschwitz: What do you mean when you encourage us to recognize and honor “the ecology of praise”?

Scott Hoezee: In God’s sight and hearing the physical cosmos is like a symphony of praise. This theme comes through again and again in Scripture, particularly in Old Testament psalms but also in the Apostle Paul’s writings. The birds of the air, trees of the field, mountains, brooks, and all the rest do not merely reveal God’s handiwork and move us to praise God, but they *themselves* actively praise God. So I’ve wanted to tune people’s hearing to recognize in the cadences of creation something of what God hears. In the preservation of the physical

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cosmos we are helping to preserve and perpetuate what to God is a most beautiful song of praise. When I talk about “the ecology of praise,” it’s an attempt to turn the ecological movement of preservation of species, habitats, and the like in a decidedly biblical direction: to see those efforts as not merely keeping alive this or that species for our grandchildren to enjoy, though that’s a noble goal, but also as keeping all of the members of God’s choir in place.

When you interpret the beautiful passage Psalm 104:1-2, you borrow John Stek’s metaphor that the cosmos is “the glory robe of God.”

Yes, I liked that image as soon as I heard it in seminary class. It pictures creation as a garment that enhances the glory of God while yet being separate from God, as something that gives God joy and delight similar to a favorite outfit we really enjoy putting on. I like “the glory robe” because it shows how dear creation is to God and how it enhances God’s beauty and glory, and yet it avoids the theological pitfalls of pantheism, which many Christians fear is an inevitable result of thinking too much about creation. As C. S. Lewis once said, we Christians always need to be fighting on two fronts. On the one hand we do not want to identify creation so closely with God that we become pantheists who think everything is divine, but on the other hand we’ve got to see God’s close association with the rutabaga growing in our garden.

How did you come to delight in and to care for the creation?

I grew up in the country on a farm, so I’ve always enjoyed being out and about in the woods. When I was in the second or third grade I really liked birds and got to know as many different bird species as I could. I

came back to that hobby during my seminary years when I met my wife, because she and her father were big on bird watching. Then my mother got back into it, so I really took up that hobby again. Meanwhile, I discovered the hobby of snorkeling over coral reefs and that whole world opened itself up to me. So, I have always enjoyed looking at and learning about at least those aspects of the physical world.

My seminary training never connected to those interests and I didn't find much theological reflection on them. I came to that more or less on my own as I began to preach; I wanted to find ways to relate those parts of life to my faith. Certainly my avocations of snorkeling, bird watching, hiking, and cross-country skiing were not "un-Christian" activities. Therefore, it seemed, there must be some way to reflect on them theologically and bring them into my preaching. I started to read the Bible looking for that kind of theological reflection, for affirmations of these hobbies that I enjoyed. When I began to read through that lens, all kinds of material in Scripture leapt out at me in a way it had never done before.

Your story reminds me of this comment:

"Among the many holy tasks of Christians is to foster, nurture, and develop children's God-given sense of curiosity [about the world] in such a way that it will still be there when they are adults. For this whole world belongs to God—we should want to know more about it." (*Remember Creation*, p. 29) Are we failing our children and stifling their curiosity?

Sometimes we do. Fortunately, some Christian day school teachers in my tradition are doing a better job than did some of my teachers, although I had many wonderful teachers. When I've spoken to teachers' conventions on these themes, it's been heartening to see Christian school teachers connect the curiosity that children in elementary grades naturally possess about anthills and so on, to their Biblical and theological formation. That's very important. Otherwise it's easy to grow up thinking, as I once thought, that there's little connection between a Thursday afternoon field trip when you tramp through a wetland and a Sunday morning in church, where the windows are opaque, and the words and songs offer no reminders of what you saw in the wetland.

As parents, teachers, or pastors, we should connect the joy that children rather naturally take in creation with the work of Jesus and their



Scott Hoezee urges his church members to "remember creation" in worship and environmental action.

identity as Christians. This will foster their curiosity and sanction it in a biblical way that may help to keep it alive. Otherwise, if we indicate, subtly or overtly, that curiosity about the physical world is nice, but it doesn't belong at church, then we might wither children's curiosity a bit. For instance, we send subtle signals when we sing, "turn your eyes upon Jesus, ... and the things of earth will grow strangely dim."



Large crosses are integrated into the window frames of the sanctuary of Holyway Presbyterian Church nestled at the base of Mount Zion near Tucson, AZ. (Used by permission of the architects, Albanese-Brooks Associates PC.)

How can our church communities, in our liturgy and architecture, become "creation-friendly" places?

The liturgy is easier to address, because short of literally knocking out walls and getting rid of much-loved stained glass windows, there's only so much retrofitting that may be practical in a church. My church recently finished a new fellowship space with many clear windows and skylights so we can grow plants and flowers, and we took real care with the

landscaping of trees, a variety of plants and flowers, and so forth. When we are able to see the physical creation out through the windows or bring the plants of creation inside, we are reminded that we aren't hermetically sealed behind brick and glass, but that the context of our worship is the physical creation. Anything that makes our houses of worship transparent to creation helps a lot, whether it be art, banners, or architectural retrofitting—not just because it's pretty, but as a reminder of the context of our worship and as one of things for which we're grateful.

We have control each week over the liturgy in a way that is not true of architecture. At least some of our prayers and hymns on a regular basis ought to be creation related. Sermons now and again should focus in an extended way on some aspect of the physical world, and even when they do not, some sermon illustrations might include agrarian images or examples from the physical world. These heighten people's awareness. For instance, in the last year I have begun to write most of my prayers, particularly my congregational prayers in the morning service. At least once or twice a month I open that prayer with a reflection on and thanksgiving for cre-

ation. I thank God for not just the wonders of creation that are “way out there” but the wonders of creation that are in the sanctuary every week in the form of fingernails, kidneys that are functioning, and hearts that are beating, in order to make people aware that within our own skin are wonders for which we give thanks to God. It’s not weird and it ought not be unusual to mention something like a spleen or a knee joint in a prayer. If as the psalmist said, “we are fearfully and wonderfully made,” then reflecting on that in a liturgical setting only makes sense.

How have church members responded to these sermons and prayers?

Their response to my sermon series based upon biblical passages about the physical creation encouraged me that there was a need for a book like *Remember Creation*. Most people said that they had never heard such sustained reflection on the nature, purpose, and future of the physical cosmos. Some people clearly had been longing to hear their own love of creation reflected in a Christian theological context. They were very, very appreciative. Members of my church know that they will hear two themes, grace and a cosmic perspective on redemption, weaving in and out of all my sermons.

Other reviews and correspondence about *Remember Creation* fall into two or three categories. Some folks say that this emphasis is fresh and new in evangelical circles, but nevertheless they, like my congregation, are very appreciative. On the other

hand, there is a certain amount of resistance. If I get specific about the ecological side of all this and say, for instance, “Here’s a salmon species that we need to preserve,” or I really get down to brass tacks as to what it means to exercise ecological stewardship as an act of discipleship, some people very quickly caricature what I’m saying. They raise five or six counter-

balancing points: “Yes, maybe it would be good to preserve a certain species, but something that you didn’t mention makes it impossible or impractical to do that.” They resist specific, hands-on preservation efforts. When I keep it abstract, people are more willing to go along with it. If I get concrete in what I’m saying, then they resist changing their lifestyle as much as I suggest. Some say, “Well, recycling is fine, but really it doesn’t

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do any good,” or “It costs more energy to recycle than to make new stuff.” No matter who suggests the ecological efforts, whether it’s a pastor or somebody from the Sierra Club, some Christians respond that it is just a little “loopy” and too much work.

Some Christians think that an emphasis on creation theology must be at the expense of a theology of redemption. How do you bring creation and redemption together?

The two big themes of the whole Bible are creation and redemption. They go together hand in glove very naturally. If you just follow the line of

We assume that if a group is not Christian, then we ought not to work with it. The notion of “common grace” frees us from that rather simple dichotomy. If our theology tells us that a group is doing what is right, then we recognize in it the glimmers of God’s grace even if some of the reasons they offer for their work are muddled or somewhat wrong-headed.

Scripture through, it begins in Genesis with the creation and ends in Revelation with a new creation, and in between the whole story is of God’s long-term effort to salvage a creation that went sour. If you begin your theological reflections with the creation, with God’s loving, zestful, and delightful efforts at creating this exuberant cosmos of variety, then you notice all along in Scripture that this is what

God is working to keep alive and to bring back to the original intent that God had in the beginning. One problem that we evangelical Christians have is that we don’t begin our theological reflections with creation, but with the cross. Our religious ethos and piety in America have been forged by the great revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, and therefore our focus has been on “Jesus died for me,” “I come to Jesus,” and “I am redeemed or saved.” It is very human-centered, very individualistic. Now if we begin with the notion of salvation that gets proclaimed at revival meetings, then the creation theme becomes a mere footnote rather than the keynote of our whole theology. If, however, we can see the cross as the apex, the center point, the climax of a story that began with the creation, then the creation becomes an essential part of what Jesus died to redeem.

Though some people in Sierra Club and similar groups espouse a rather strange “religious stew,” these organizations do a lot of good work. In *Remembering Creation* you use the idea of “common grace” to recommend that Christians ought to work critically with secular environmental groups.

For too long we have tacitly assumed that if a group is not Christian, then we ought not to support or work with it. The notion of “common grace” helps to free us from that rather simple dichotomy. If a group is doing what is right and proper from our theological perspective, then we recognize the glimmers of God’s grace that are present even if some of the reasons that they offer for their work are muddled or somewhat wrong-headed. So, nevertheless, we would work with them. If ecological preservation groups are pursuing something which we think is redolent of God and of God’s intentions for this world, then why not applaud what they do? Until recently no specifically Christian groups were doing the same kind of work and we could not say, “Well, I’ll support this group instead of the Sierra Club because this one’s Christian.” It’s changing now, but I still think that we look for the good that groups do and support them for that reason. God works in many ways and through many different people to get his work done.

What would you say is the role of creation care in our discipleship?

Pastors, teachers, and seminary professors, especially those who serve in evangelical and fundamentalist traditions, have an obligation to highlight this somewhat neglected but extremely important facet of theology. They must lead us to see ourselves as part of the big biblical story of creation and redemption, and then to become excited about actually being caught up in the grand, moving work of God through which God is tenderly reclaiming all that God has made. Sometimes, for instance, people worry that heaven will be boring; you know, how long can we strum golden harps on a cloud without becoming a little bit restless? That very fret stems from a lack of understanding about what the new creation, the kingdom of God, is going to be like. If we would understand that it will be endlessly fascinating because of the variety of life and creatures there, and see that eternity will be an endless exploration, appreciation, and celebration of that richly textured place, then our thinking about heaven would turn in a very new direction. ☩