***A Christian Approach to the Meaning of Creation***

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The Christian teaching of creation is not primarily about the mechanics of how the world began a long, long time ago. It is, rather, about the moral and spiritual significance of creatures as they live their life with each other, and before God as the source of their communal life. That the world finds its *beginning* in God clearly matters, because it communicates that life is fundamentally a gift gratefully to be received and nurtured. Equally significant, however, is the belief that creatures find their *salvation* and their *purpose* and *fulfilment* in God. Creation is as much about the end of things as it is about their beginning. Deism, the view that God started the world and then left it to function according to its own (natural) laws, is a mistake because it denies that God is continually present to each creature as the divine breath animating it to life. As the Psalmist (104:30) says, speaking of God:

“When you send forth your spirit, they are created;

and you renew the face of the ground.”

No creature can stand on its own. All depend on God’s vivifying, renewing spirit. God is forever close to creatures because they are the material manifestation of God’s own love and delight.

The roots to a Christian understanding of creation go deep into the Hebrew Bible. Here we find multiple creation stories, each giving a unique, yet complementary, account of what creation means. In Genesis 1-2:4, for instance, we find that God creates by bringing order and light to a world that was dark and without form. God enlists creatures to work with God in producing a fertile and fecund world. Creation is good and beautiful, and it is cherished by God. The proof of this is that the seventh day ends in God’s own Shabbat, a time when God rests and delights in the divine love that has been made visible, tactile, fragrant, auditory, and delectable. The story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3 continues this theme of God’s intimacy with creatures by portraying God as the essential Gardener who breathes animating life into soil (*adamah*) so as to produce the first human being (*adam*), but also the plants and all the creatures of the land and air. God is not distant or aloof. God cares for creatures like a gardener looks after a garden, protecting, nurturing, and pruning all along the way. As the Israelites would later proclaim, God looks after the land. “The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (Deuteronomy 11:12).

Both Judaism and Christianity are often charged with being anthropocentric religions. The textual proof for this charge is Genesis 1, where human beings are told to “subdue and have dominion” over all other creatures. A great deal can and needs to be said about the nature of this dominion, but it is a mistake to believe that scripture presents creatures as existing solely for the purposes of human flourishing. Non-human creatures have their own relationship with God as their creator, and are known to praise God in ways that are unique to themselves. Psalm 148, for instance, presents the sun and moon, mountains and hills, wild animals and creeping things giving worship to God. But it is in the book of Job, particularly in God’s speeches from the whirlwind, where we see that God cares for all creatures regardless of their usefulness to human flourishing. Indeed, one of the most important lessons for Job to learn is that creatures do not exist solely to make him happy. God delights in and watches over the wild creatures that are of no use to people. God even loves the creatures that can kill people. The human task is to learn to love creatures in terms of God’s prior love for everything, rather than strictly in terms of their utility for us. Though creatures must certainly be used by people—most basically for food—they exist first and foremost for God rather than for humans alone.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a clear sense that creatures find themselves in a disordered and languishing state. Creatures suffer and are frustrated in their ability to live the life God intends for them. Human sinfulness certainly has contributed to this. The violence and injustice people commit against each other cannot be contained within the human realm, but invariably spills over into the created order. But God does not abandon creatures to their own misery and violence because from the beginning God’s covenant of faithfulness extends to “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Genesis 9:17). Given God’s love and promise to all creatures, it is not surprising that God promises to renew creation and make it a peaceable kingdom (see Isaiah 11) in which creatures can each achieve the fullness of life that God desires. God’s plan for creation is not to leave it behind or destroy it, but to heal it so that creatures can be firmly planted in the land and enjoy its many blessings (see Amos 9:13-15).

In the Christian New Testament scriptures, the themes I have been highlighting are assumed but also recast in terms of the life of Jesus Christ, who is God made incarnate in human flesh. The meaning and significance of creation are determined by Jesus of Nazareth because it is in his life and ministry that we see embodied the divine love that first brought creatures into being and that daily sustains them on their way to everlasting life with God. Christians are instructed to look to Jesus to understand the meaning of creation because in Jesus people see the creating power and intention of God fully realized.

In one of the early proclamations of the meaning and significance of Jesus, these themes were presented in a striking manner. Speaking of Jesus, the community said,

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:15-20)

Admittedly, this is a peculiar way of speaking. How can the creation and the meaning of “all things in heaven and on earth” be attributed to a person who clearly lived for a relatively short time in a particular place? The key to answering this question is to appreciate that Jesus is not simply a finite human creature. He is the one person in whom the fullness of God is said to dwell. As the Prologue to John’s gospel put it, Jesus is the eternal, creating word (*logos*) that was with God from the beginning, and he is the word through whom all things came into being: “without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all the people” (John 1:3-4). Jesus, in other words (and as the major Christian creeds would later affirm), is fully human *and* fully divine at the same time, and because of this deep mystery it can be said that Jesus is the interpretive key that allows us to unlock the meaning and significance of all God’s creative activity.

This language is fairly abstract. To appreciate what this affirmation of creation in and through Christ means we need to attend to the ministries of Jesus because it is there that we can see what God’s intention for creatures looks like in practice. As the gospels clearly reveal, Jesus works to lead creatures into the fullness of their life, what John’s gospel calls life’s abundance. Insofar as Jesus meets someone who is hungry or sick or under an evil spirit, he feeds or heals or exorcises them because hunger, sickness, and demon possession represent a diminishment of life and a frustration of creatures to live into the life God desires for them. Put another way, Jesus reveals that the eternal life of God is “to be for others.” The activity of creation is, therefore, the making material of this other-directed love. For God to create is to love others in the form of a hospitality that first makes room for others to be and then nurtures them so that they can develop all their God-given potential.

Given this description of God’s creativity as the action that both brings creatures into being and then also sustains them in their living, we can now better appreciate why it is important to join the work of creation with the work of salvation. God does not create and then leave creatures to languish in their own pain and suffering. God enters into life with creatures, most poignantly in the incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ, so that God can heal creaturely life from within and put it on a path of joy and delight.

Which brings us back to the Colossians hymn, where we read that God is working through the blood of Christ’s cross to reconcile all things to Godself. Though creation exists in a state of division and decay, the logic of God’s creative love is such that God works to reconcile creatures with each other and with God so that all of creation can be a place of peace. The action that makes this possible is the self-offering love that Jesus demonstrated in the way of the cross. For life to fully flourish, people must refuse the tendency that wants to secure life as a private possession or as a tool for one’s own advancement. They must, like a seed of grain, give themselves wholly to the soil of life—die into the soil—so that the one grain can produce much fruit (see John 12:24-26). Life achieves abundance by the giving away of oneself, and by the joining of life with life. Self-offering love is the power and the action that makes this possible.

It is not uncommon to find among Christians (along with many others) the idea that when they die their souls will separate from their bodies so that they can escape the tribulations of this earth and live forever with God in some far-away heaven. This position (one that is much more in line with Socratic philosophy than with scripture) is understandable because it is plain to everyone that material bodies are the places of tremendous suffering and pain. Bodies suffer sickness and aging. They slowly fall apart, and because of this fact many people cannot wait to be freed of embodiment altogether. From a scriptural and theological point of view, this is a profound error. Jesus reveals that the Christian response to embodiment’s troubles is not to flee them but to address them directly through acts of nurture and healing. Christians affirm the resurrection of the body rather than the immortality of a disembodied soul. That means that our final and ultimate end is to enjoy and embodied, resurrected life with God. What the precise nature of a resurrected body is, we do not know. What we surmise is that this body will be, as Paul says (in 1 Corinthians 15), a “spiritual body,” which is not a disembodied soul but a material body that is fully under the power of God’s loving and life-giving Spirit.

From scripture’s beginning unto its end, it is clear that God loves particular creatures and the whole context of creaturely life. God does not seek to see creation languish or suffer, nor does God desire to see creation destroyed. Which is why, at the very end of the Bible, God is described as the one who *comes down* to live eternally with redeemed creatures in the holy city that is the New Jerusalem. As Revelation says it, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them” (21:3). This is a breathtaking vision because it suggests that a genuinely Christian desire should never be to escape the world but, instead, with God to participate in creation’s healing so that this earth and all its life can be a fitting home for God. At this time, “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (21:4). Or, to recapitulate an earlier theme, in the end all material creatures will join with God in an unending celebration of Sabbath delight and joy.