

From the Bishop

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good (Genesis 1:1, 31).

I am old enough to remember the first earth day, April 22, 1970, and the push by young people across this country to do something for the environment and get involved with matters of ecology. The focus back then was on oil spills and raw sewage, pesticides, the loss of wilderness, and all the trash that littered the sidewalks, parks and freeways.

As I write these words we are about to head to beautiful Door County with the fall colors near peak and the waves from Green Bay and Lake Michigan still splashing the shoreline. Pastors and deacons will gather for the annual theological conference, this year themed, “Let the Whole Creation Cry.”

I remember when Mt. St. Helen in Oregon erupted as a volcano back on May 18, 1980. I was a pastor in Oklahoma at the time. Because I had served a few years earlier as a vicar in the Pacific Northwest, I had followed with great interest the tremors and signs leading up to the event. In a conversation with a congregation member I quoted one of our seminary homiletics professors who said the eruption was a cry from the bowels of the earth for the redemption of the world. The member scoffed at the comment taking the words probably with much more literalism than I or the professor had intended at the time. Today, however, I wonder if those words should be taken much more literally.

Hurricane Michael has now ravaged the panhandle of Florida and the residents of Mexico Beach say it looks like an atomic bomb has exploded in their city, complete neighborhoods wiped away. The wildfires in California burned more than 1.5 million acres this summer. Displaced persons around the globe now number around 67 million, some of whom are displaced from their homelands because of drought.

It was only a week or so ago that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of scientists convened by the United Nations to guide world leaders, issued its first report following the 2015 Paris Agreement. The report states that if greenhouse emissions continue at the current rate, the atmosphere will warm up by as much as 2.7 degrees F (1.5 C) above pre-industrial levels by 2040. The report goes on to describe a world in which coastlines are inundated by rising water levels and intensified droughts. We can expect worsening food shortages, wildfires and the mass death of coral reefs. Without significant changes enacted that could curtail greenhouse gas emissions the report predicts massive ecological trauma within the lifetime of many of us.

When Martin Luther penned the words of the Small Catechism giving an explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, I think Luther primarily marveled at the beauty and goodness of creation. Luther spoke about God creating “...me and all that exists.” As a pastor I always impressed upon the confirmands the “P” words in Luther’s explanation: God provides, preserves, protects all that God has created.

But today we have become ever-more aware of the humble stature of the earth, a tiny speck within a vast expanding universe. We also are ever-more aware of the vulnerability of the earth and the destructive behaviors of 7.6 billion inhabitants.

Twenty-five years ago in 1993 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the social statement, “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice.” The very first words of the statement speak of our hope:

Christian concern for the environment is shaped by the Word of God spoken in creation, the Love of God hanging on a cross, the Breath of God daily renewing the face of the earth.

The statement calls upon every congregation to become a “Creation Awareness Center.” There is so much beauty to behold in the goodness of God’s creation. Many of us indeed will attest to the powerful connection between being in the outdoors, in a park or woods or along the river or lake, and the renewal of our spiritual lives. But there are also daunting problems facing us today with dire consequences that we ignore at our own peril.

God has spoken powerfully to us in raising Jesus from the dead and we remain people of eternal hope. In Christ you are a New Creation, Paul even asserts. With John the Seer we take heart knowing that God has promised a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21). Because of this hope, we are not only comforted but empowered to do the work of caring for creation.

“Caring for Creation” concludes with these two statements:

The prospect of doing too little too late leads many people to despair. But as people of faith, captives of hope, and vehicles of God’s promise, we face the crisis.

We claim the promise of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1), and join in the offertory prayer (Lutheran Book of Worship, page 109): “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”