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Outside In: Opening Worship to God's World of Wonder and Delight

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It's time to bring more of the environment into the church. It's time to bring more of the outside inside. It's time to mix the physical world with our spiritual worship in ways we've not much done before. That's what I thought. It was about six years ago when I decided to make a frontal assault on what I perceived to be a dearth of ecological awareness in my congregation. It seemed that for a long time, both in my growing-up years in Ada, Michigan, and in the first few years of my own preaching, that I had neither heard nor very often delivered sermons that focused on the physical creation as the Bible presents it. So I decided to launch a sustained series of morning sermons on creation and on a Christian approach to ecological stewardship.

The plan then was to make clear that the Bible is itself our first, best guide to nurturing greater care for the environment of God's creation. So on the week this sermon series was to begin, I picked up my pulpit Bible to begin making this point by reading the opening chapter of Genesis. But no sooner did I touch the Bible than a dime-sized, yellow spider raced out from under the Bible, skittered past my hand, and disappeared under the lip of the pulpit.

Of course, I didn't mention this to the congregation but simply proceeded with the Scripture reading as though nothing had happened. I must confess, however, that my first inclination was to sweep this spider away or, better yet, quietly to squash him with the Bible! After all, the pulpit is no place for an arachnid – creatures such as this belong not in church but outside. But this little fellow got away safely, never to be seen by me again.

At the risk of making too much of so commonplace an incident, that spider's surprise ecclesiastical appearance – and my initial disdain of it – reminded me that in many ways this highlights our problem as Christian worshipers of God. It's time to bring more of the outside inside. That's what I thought, yet when a part of that outside world intruded on my pulpit, I was at once unprepared for it and even, alas, annoyed by it...

Again, however, something in this story illustrates our problem: too often when we gather in our churches for worship, we find ourselves far removed from the welter of creatures with whom we share this planet – so much so that even to see a spider or any creature like it in church is rare if not annoying. But it's not merely our physical separation from spiders or oak trees that should give us pause. Of equal concern is the fact that we are as often as not also mentally removed from the physical cosmos. "Out of sight, out of mind," the old adage asserts. Just so, but tragically so.

Because within most church sanctuaries worshipers are cut off from the creation in almost every sense. We proceed through the weekly liturgy without seeing or thinking much about nature and its wonders. We gather in buildings crafted of man-made bricks, illuminated by artificial lights, and walled in by stained-glass windows – windows which, though rich in holy symbolism, point to heavenly things, not earthly ones. Also, the mere fact that these windows are made of stained glass – as opposed to the clear glass of most windows – prevents us from even seeing the outside world. At Calvin Church, we can usually tell if the sun is shining or not but beyond that our sanctuary's stained glass windows prevent us from knowing anything else about what's going on outside. So there are many occasions when, upon exiting the building after worship, we are surprised to see that it had rained or snowed at some point during the service and we had been wholly unaware of it because we cannot see out.

Curiously, however, it was not always so for God's people when they gathered for worship. If you look at the descriptions of Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 6 7, you notice that the design of the temple was intended to remind the congregation of the created order. Solomon's temple was filled with carvings of gourds,

pomegranates, lilies, palm trees, flowers, lions, bears, and bulls. A major piece of the temple was a huge bronze sculpture depicting the ocean and sea creatures frolicking amid the carved metallic swells.

The creation was the setting for Israelite worship in ways it seldom is in modern houses of worship. So even as the Israelites praised their heavenly God, they were reminded of his earthly (and earthy) created splendors. But today this is seldom the case. And that's too bad because our very churches – and the worship services we hold within them – ought to remind us that a big part of our Christian vocation is nurturing delight in this universe of wonders – a delight similar to God's own playful joy in creation. This world teems with opportunities for such delight – the question is whether we take the time to notice. On that Sunday morning just as I was getting ready to proclaim the wonders of the creation's life on this earth, a fellow citizen of this planet – that little spider – made himself (or herself) known and so reminded me that we are surrounded by a colossal exuberance of life.

As I said at the outset, our churches already have something that can remind us of the creation – the Bible. But here's a funny thing: for some odd reason, in North America it seems the churches that do the best job celebrating the Bible as God's inspired Word do the worst job in thinking about, caring for, or celebrating the creation! According to a recent study, congregations that are the most committed to the tenet of biblical inerrancy are the very same congregations that are the least concerned about ecology. This study showed that the more authority a congregation gives to the Bible, the less interest that congregation tends to have in the environment. Oddly, more liberal congregations, which tend to have lower views of Scripture, have a much greater concern to preserve the creation. More oddly still, secular people with no ties to the Bible have been and remain the ones who are at the forefront of ecological concern.

In fact, have you noticed that in evangelical circles there are relatively few books published about ecology but that there are many, many volumes published about evolution? Indeed, library shelves everywhere are sagging under the weight of books that deal with some aspect of creation versus evolution. A few years ago Christianity Today's Book of the Year was Darwin's Black Box by Michael Behe, a highly technical, scientific book dealing with certain intracellular biochemical subcomponents, the complexity of which, Behe believes, could not have formed through Darwinian evolutionary development. But Christianity Today's Top 25 lists regularly contain books like that, yet I have not yet seen any titles on that list that celebrate the creation that exists now, but only books that ponder how we got here based on what happened in the beginning.

The simple fact of the matter is that outside of books that fight against evolution, there just are not that many Christian books available on the creation – and the Christian ecology books that are available don't sell worth beans compared to the anti-evolution tomes. In fact, when Eerdmans decided to publish my book a few years ago, they first had to come up with a marketing plan that would avoid using the word "ecology" Because if a book gets slotted into the "ecology" category, it is dead in the water in Christian bookstores. So they ended up categorizing my book under the heading of "Christian living"! (It didn't help, though – the book still didn't sell well and got remaindered out of Eerdmans warehouse last fall!)

I'm not mystified as to why there are books about creation versus evolution in that it is a very important topic. Granted. But what I can't figure out is why the people who are buying and reading these books are some of same folks who have so little interest in ecology. Why do we seem more interested in how the creation came into existence than we are in the creation that now exists? Aren't both topics of great importance? Shouldn't the one naturally follow the other?

Imagine a mother and father who become so obsessed with thinking about the day of their daughter's birth that they scarcely give any thought to raising the little girl once they take her home from the hospital. Imagine parents for whom the moment of birth becomes so vital that the child's subsequent life strikes them as vastly uninteresting. So at the dinner table each evening they spend all their time retelling the story of the day their little girl was born. But they are so busy talking about her birth that neither of them ever check to see if she is eating nutritional food. At other times they are so fascinated by watching again and again the videotape taken in

the delivery room that they often fail to notice that their youngster has wandered out into the street or that she is playing with the poisons stored under the kitchen sink.

That may be an absurd analogy but it bears some resemblance to the way by which recent discussions on cosmic origins have displaced our having a similarly fierce interest to care for the world that now exists.

It seems to me that if we love our God enough to fight against those who wish to deny God as Creator, then we should also show our love for God by paying close, loving attention to what God created. Because the Bible tells us that God loves the handiwork of his universe. And if this is what God loves, then as people who love God, shouldn't we work hard at loving it too?

As Neal Plantinga has pointed out, there is a real sense in which the Bible tells us that our highest goal is to become better lovers of God. The first and great commandment, according to Jesus, is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind." We are lovers of God. But part of what it means to be a good lover is to be attentive to and to be invested in whatever our lover does, produces, and enjoys.

For instance, in healthy and strong marriages spouses take interest in each other's work and talents. If a woman is an artist, then at the end of each day her husband will ask about her work in the studio: "What are you working on these days, honey? What is your current painting about?" This husband will attend art shows where his wife's paintings are displayed and he will take joy if her work wins acclaim or awards. A loving husband may even try to learn something more about art history and art theory, perhaps by taking an art appreciation course through a local college so he can be a better conversation partner for his wife when she talks about her work. He will also gladly go to places like the Chicago Art Institute and will listen closely as his wife explains the paintings they encounter there.

Such is the nature of true love: We attend to, learn about, take interest in, and nurture that which brings our lover joy and a sense of accomplishment. A marriage will not last long if spouses never ask each other about their respective jobs. If we are invested in our work – and most people are – then we identify with it. That is why one of our first questions upon meeting someone new is, "What do you do?" Knowing what another person does helps us to discover who he or she is. That's also why if you ask a man "What do you do?" he does not typically answer you by saying something like, "I perform plumbing tasks." No, our answer to the "What do you do?" question is far more personal and all-encompassing – we usually reply with something like, "I am a plumber." Our work identifies us even as we identify with our work. That's why if a husband becomes disconnected from what his wife creates through her work, sooner or later he will find he is disconnected from his wife as a person.

According to the Bible, if you were to ask God who he is, one of his first statements of reply would be, "I am the Creator God." The Bible is God's inspired book by which he tells us who he is. Clearly, in this self-revelation God places a premium on his beloved cosmos. So if we love God, we will also take a loving interest in his creation. Like a husband with his wife's art work, so all of us should ask questions about God's work of creation, we should enroll in the spiritual equivalent of a "creation appreciation" course, we should gladly take time to stroll through this world. In all these ways we will show our divine Lover that we are only too happy to attend to that which brings him joy.

Just look at how even the authors of the New Testament opened many of their books and letters. Recall that when the apostle John opened his Gospel, he began by harking back to Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word [and] ... through him all things were made" (John 1:1, 3a). The Book of Hebrews also begins with creation: "[I]n these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son – through whom he made the universe –. In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands" (Heb. 1:2, 10).

When Paul opened his letter to the Colossians, he made this same theological-biblical move: "For by [Jesus] all things were created – and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16 17). Even the last book of the Bible recalls the creation. When John reports his vision of the heavenly praise chorus to the Lamb of God, the

first song he reports hearing is not the one about the redemptive blood of the Lamb but rather the first heavenly song John hears and records for us is the song that proclaims, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Rev. 4:11).

These biblical writers opened their books and letters this way because they knew that the two great themes of divine history (and hence now of Scripture) are creation and redemption. Yet we tend to forget, starting our theological reflections with the cross and not with the creation that the cross redeemed!

In his novel *Toward the End of Time*, John Updike begins with a paragraph which may be profoundly descriptive of the way most of us go at life much of the time. In the novel's opening scene the main character, a 66-year-old man named Ben Turnbull, wakes up one late-November morning, looks out his bedroom window, and discovers it has snowed over night – the first snow of the season. Updike writes that as Ben stares out at this "fragile inch of white" clinging to the branches of the trees and laying like a woolen blanket on the grassy parts of his property, he looks into himself to see if he can find any trace of that child-like exhilaration at seeing a surprise snowfall.

We probably all recall what that was like, and for those of us with young children, we occasionally have the chance to see it again. We adults look out the window and say, "Huh, it snowed overnight. Hope it's not slippery driving into work. Hope school isn't canceled because what are we going to do with the kids all day if it is?" That's an adult for you! But a child looks out the window and says, "Hooray! It snowed! Isn't it pretty? Can we go out and play?"

Such is a child's reaction. So as Ben Turnbull looks out at the season's first snow, he checks his heart to see if anything like those giddy, child-like emotions can still be found within himself. But he finds nothing. Instead, as Updike puts it, "Ben views this shining new day like a fresh meal brightly served to a hospital patient with a dwindling appetite."

Dwindling appetites. That, it seems to me, is an apt description for how a lot of people today—including a lot of Christian people—go at life. We are surrounded by a creation of profound beauty, stunning complexity, and dazzling variety. Yet our appetites for such things keep dwindling. We turn our faces away from the creation just like a cancer patient wrinkles up her nose and turns away from the tray of food brought in by the nurse. Even the freshest and tastiest food cannot overcome the fact that she just doesn't feel like eating.

Yet Simone Weil once poignantly observed that one of the deepest dimensions of the Genesis account of creation is the revelation that "God is good because he delights in the existence of something other than himself." In other words, God is not self-centered—he enjoys staring at, pondering, and observing others, those who are unlike himself. As the only creatures made in the divine image of this God, we have the ability likewise to revel in the creation of our great God. But do we? Is this characteristic of God on display in us?

For if a part of God's own goodness is his ability to transcend himself in order to delight in others, then a part of the divine image in us is likewise our God-given, godlike ability to transcend ourselves in order to take note of creatures not like us. So far as we know, only human beings can do this.

For instance, whitetail deer in the deep forest may live side by side with creatures like the wood thrush, but as far as we can tell the deer never spend any time contemplating this bird. The wood thrush's liquid melodies may fill the forest, but there is no evidence that deer ever stop their ordinary activities to soak up and appreciate the bird's song. Similarly, bald eagles may use their superior eyes to look for fish to scoop out of the water for dinner, but eagles never use those same eyes to make a study of tide pools or to ponder the behavior of humpback whales.

Only we appear able to do the godlike thing of studying, knowing, and delighting in otherness. It is for this same reason John Calvin occasionally pointed out that one of the reasons God created human beings to stand upright is precisely so we can lift our gaze to the heavens, praising God for the celestial wonders we see

in the night sky. Our very posture, Calvin suggested, helps us to reach out and appreciate other creatures and created wonders!

As creatures made in God's likeness, this is at once our privilege and our task. There is joy out there in the creation of our God. As image bearers, it is our holy vocation to notice it, love it, revel in it, and preserve it. But do we? Or in our technological world are we often content to live cut off from the created order?

As Elizabeth Achtemeier has poignantly asked, are we more impressed by microchips than seeds? Everybody marvels over the Pentium IV processor from Intel and all the computer wonders it can perform. But when was the last time you heard someone –including yourself – exclaim over that tiny little seed from which a whole cornstalk can grow?! Do some today spend more time looking at colorful home pages on the Internet than they do absorbing the natural colors on bird wings and tulip petals? Why do millions go to Florida just to see a mechanical shark at the Universal Studios theme park but so few go to Florida to marvel over the real-life, endangered manatees in the nearby Everglades? Why do so many people travel to the West not to gasp at the majestic deserts and mountains but instead to duck into darkened Las Vegas casinos to gamble their life away?

But why do we take vacations to places that are not a part of God's creation but are instead man-made imitations – cheap throwbacks to the natural world? Why go to these places when the genuine article is readily available in national, state, and even city parks? Indeed, even some once-popular national parks are now being trumped by man-made vacation spots.

According to a New York Times article a couple of years ago, once upon a time (and not so long ago) people who traveled to the area around Gatlinburg, Tennessee, did so primarily to soak up the wonders of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. That, however, was before Dolly Parton built her "Dollywood" theme park in nearby Pigeon Forge. Now the once-sleepy Pigeon Forge, population four thousand, attracts ten million visitors annually, but most of them never make it into the national park. As the Times reported it, "With shopping, attractions, and 9 live music theaters, soon to be 10, many tourists here do not visit the national park at all, or zip in and out for what locals call 'a windshield experience.' One visitor who never managed to get into the national park said, 'There was so much to do in the theme park and city that I just ran out of time.'"

In so much of our lives – both our ordinary, everyday lives as well as our leisure hours – we too often live cut off from the creation. Instead, we immerse ourselves in the technology of the Internet, in the entertainment proffered by Blockbuster Video, in indoor environments like shopping malls, or in the artificial environment of an amusement park.

But I would contend that these are trends we need to resist. Especially those of us who are parents, teachers, and preachers: we have a great responsibility to make ourselves more alive to the wonders of creation in order to infuse such enthusiasm into the children, students, and parishioner under our care. Because all Christians should be naturally curious about God's creation. We should have a hunger and a longing to know more about this world and our place in it.

Among the many holy tasks of Christians is to foster, nurture, and develop children's God-given sense of curiosity 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.

Christians need to develop what Sallie McFague has called "attention epistemology," meaning simply that we need to stop our busy lives long enough to peer out into the world; stop long enough to stare into tide pools and forests to see what is really there. The longer you look and the closer you pay attention, the more you will see. And the more you see, the better poised you will be to give intelligent, informed, pointed praise to the Creator for all the specific wonders he has made.

So how might we enhance our awareness of and celebration of God's physical creation in ways that form intentional acts of discipleship? Let me close this morning with four broad suggestions for how we could

potentially do this. The first three pick up on things we can do within our personal and family lives in terms of vacation planning and activities we can do at home. The fourth and final set of suggestions will focus more on what we can do within our church communities. Time will prohibit me from fleshing these out much, so this will be more like a list than a full explanation.

First, in our individual lives we could begin by planning vacations that will take us farther into the created world instead of farther away from it. We should plan to go to a national park or some other such place of created wonder at least as often – and preferably far more often – as we would go to a place like Disneyworld, Hollywood, or New York City. We should spend our weekends at least as often bird-watching or hiking in local forests as strolling through the local mall.

Writer Robert Pyle once lamented what he calls "the extinction of experience." We no longer have much direct contact with the creation, and this lack of physical immersion in the world tends to make us apathetic even when we hear about ecological threats. While I was working on my book, the great undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau died. Years ago when Cousteau first began making his now-famous undersea film documentaries, a reporter asked him why he was doing it. Cousteau claimed he knew of no better way to fight the pollution of our oceans than to make people aware of the wonders that are there. Cousteau was convinced that if people only knew more about the wonderful life that teems beneath the water, they would become passionately interested in preserving the oceans.

Christians, of all people, should be interested in learning about the wonders of God's world. There is no better way to accomplish this learning than by actually getting out into the creation – to revel in it and to preserve it. We should accept no substitute for hands-on experiences in God's marvelous creation.

A second set of suggestions related to the first is to find daily ways by which to educate ourselves and our children about the glories of creation. Today a variety of daily tear-off calendars are available from wildlife groups and in local bookstores. Some of these feature a full-color photo of birds or other wildlife for each day, others give one fascinating fact or anecdote per day about plants, reefs, or other wildlife.

Although such secondhand facts and photos are no substitute for seeing the real thing, viewing a new picture or learning a curious fact each day can stoke the fires of our wonder even during those times when it is not feasible for us to get out of the house or city. Such daily learning can also whet our appetites for the genuine article even as it will enhance our experience once we do take a vacation or a weekend nature hike. Again, the more you know about the creation, the more you will get out of your experience in it. This may be especially true for children, who usually already possess a wide-eyed fascination with the creation. Giving them a daily opportunity to learn at least a little bit more about God's world may be one way for us to be good stewards of their God-given curiosity.

Third, if allergies and landlords permit, having a pet or a tropical fish aquarium can be a fun, loving way to bring something of the outside world inside. Every once in a while in the evening when our dog is curled up at our feet, my wife will comment that if you stop to think about it, it is rather strange to have an animal share your house with you. Although such pets are domesticated, they do bring a little something of the wider created world into our day-to-day lives. Pets are a tangible reminder that we are not alone on planet earth.

Frederick Buechner somewhere notes that if you look deeply into the eyes of animals like dogs, cats, and horses, you sense an intelligence and a capacity for feeling that, though by no means human, nevertheless speaks of our common Maker. When we recognize this in a pet, when we realize how we can come to love and grow attached to such animals in our homes, we may be reminded that all the creatures of this planet come from our loving God and that all of them are, therefore, worthy of our care, nurture, and protection.

Fourth and finally we return to where we began: in our churches. In his book *Earth-Wise* Calvin DeWitt makes scores of good suggestions on how to make our congregations more aware of the need to celebrate the creation. A few of the ideas I'll give to you now are lifted from Dr. DeWitt.

On the architectural side we could encourage a little retrofitting of our sanctuaries to make them more open to and reflective of the natural world. Whether this means having more windows, bringing in more plants and flowers, or finding other ways to symbolize and point to the creation, we should do what we can to make our contemporary houses of worship consistent with Solomon's temple and its artful ways of harking back to Eden. Perhaps banners, murals, and paintings could be used to remind worshipers that we do not come to God hermetically sealed behind brick and stained glass but worship him within the context of a stunning world of wonders.

Additionally, preachers and teachers should pay more attention to their own rhetorical use of the creation in sermons or lesson plans. In her book *Nature, God, and Pulpit* Elizabeth Achtemeier points out that once upon a time preachers made much more frequent reference to the creation than they do now. In more agricultural settings and in more rural times, preachers often tried to draw their sermon illustrations from nature (which by the way is where the biblical writers got most of their illustrations too). These days, however, preachers are more likely to allude to TV shows, movies, and current events than they are to the natural world.

But as Achtemeier thoughtfully points out, if preachers are to be true to the Bible and to the God of the Bible, they must highlight the creation more often by using it as examples or as metaphors by which to make a point. This will also help congregations avoid the tendency to divorce God the Creator from God the Redeemer. Especially those who live in urban areas would do well to use worship as a way to connect us with the creation. Because how easy it is for us city-dwellers to forget about things like crops, forests, and animals.

A couple of years ago I was a delegate to Synod, which is my denomination's annual meeting or general assembly. That year I and my fellow-delegates were presented with an innocent motion to move the Christian Reformed Church's annual day of prayer from early March to mid-May. Like most of my fellow delegates, I was prepared to vote "Yes" on this without much thought. After all, I reasoned, what difference does it make when we pray?

But suddenly there was something of an uproar from the delegates who came from agricultural settings. Why were they upset? Because the annual day of prayer traditionally had been a key time to pray for the success of agriculture, including the sowing of the crops in springtime. "If you wait until May," one farmer pointed out, "it will be too late! Our crops will already be in the ground, and we would just as soon have you all pray for this before we do our planting!" He was right. Unhappily, those of us who live our lives in the city and get our food from huge supermarkets had no inkling of this possible objection. Once again we realized how easy it is – even in church – to live cut off from the concerns and rhythms of God's creation.

In his recent and beautiful book, *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer laments at one point how the Lutheran Church dropped some years ago a traditional rubric of the annual liturgical cycle: the celebration of Rogate. Rogate was traditionally celebrated the fifth Sunday after Easter as a time to pray for the earth at the time of planting. In the rural parish that Lischer served fresh out of seminary, however, Rogation was still an important time. But for the rest of the world, Lischer says, people live and work in climate-controlled buildings, adopting a digitalized language that overrides the natural rhythms of seedtime and harvest. Since only 1.7% of Americans are still farmers, it seemed OK to drop Rogate from the annual liturgical cycle. Yet we lose still more of our sense for God's creation in so doing. The words of the traditional prayer of Rogation from the old Lutheran book of prayers is a lilting reminder of what once was, and of what could be again, if only we would remember creation as an act of discipleship. "Lord, when you came among us, you proclaimed the kingdom of God in villages and lonely places. Have mercy on those who work hard at lonely jobs. Remind all country people that you are never far from those who plant and harvest. Help everyone in our nation to say grace over their food and to respect those who produce it. O God, hear us as we bless earth, sun, wind, and water, in the name of Jesus, Amen."

Recovering such a lost focus, and pursuing other similar practices and patterns of thoughts, are wholly appropriate for Christians to consider. For our God in Christ has redeemed this world and will one day renew

the face of the creation. If it is true, as C. S. Lewis memorably wrote, that "joy will be the serious business of heaven," then it appears from the Bible that at least some of that heavenly joy will be the joy of mountains, lakes, streams, orchards, birds, fish.

If so, slivers of heavenly joy are already available to us today. At home with our children and friends, and certainly also in our houses of worship, we should educate ourselves to take notice of these slivers of heaven on earth – to notice and celebrate them with rejoicing.