

Shalom and the Community of Creation

An Indigenous Vision

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CHAPTER THREE

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

Creation Is Really Good!

“Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!” (Gen. 1:31a NLT). In the account of creation found in Genesis chapter 1, we see that God created everything, and everything God created is described in Hebrew not just as good, but as “really good!” The writer of the Genesis passage gives us the sense that the Creator is very excited about creation. I imagine it is similar to how an artist feels after that once-in-a-lifetime song, painting, or sculpture perfectly comes together and feels complete in every sense. It should comfort us to know that the Creator has such strong feelings about the creation.

When God says all creation is good, this judgment is not a light opinion about the state of creation; it is a royal decree. In the pronouncement that “it is good,” the Creator is making an accurate judgment about all that exists. By proclaiming that everything is good, right, in order, and as it should be, God sets the state of earthly normalcy. “Good” becomes the once-and-for-all standard of life on earth. What I particularly like in the first Genesis account of creation is that the writer shows us the Creator’s finesse.

Unhurried, the Spirit “hovers,” and then, at just the right time, he intentionally begins to work through each color on his palette, including the celestial water, space, and sky. Then God creates the terrestrial waters and the earth, including the plants, trees, and fruits. Next, God watches the seeds from those plants bear after their own kind. Subsequently, the Cre-

Shalom and the Community of Creation

ator sets the celestial and the terrestrial in rhythm together, including the balances of night and day, summer, fall, winter, and spring. The rhythm turns months into years. Then God fills the waters with fish and the skies with birds, and they all increase.

Whales come together in pods in the Puget Sound. Porpoises travel in schools throughout the Caribbean. Salmon make their first runs up the rivers of Scotland. Flamingos land in voluminous flocks on Lake Tanganyika in East Africa's Great Rift Valley. Canada geese make their first Vs as they repeatedly cross America's Central Flyway. The waters teem with fish. The birds dot the skies. Then, animals of every form, stripe, and color appear, and finally, human beings are created. The writer gives us the sense in this account that the Creator immensely enjoyed creating our world. The act of creation was not impetuous or hasty but instead was deliberate and thoughtful, stretching out over time, as if it was all done so the Creator could receive maximum pleasure.

In the first account of creation, each action and each result of God's action is differentiated. Not one created part *is* the other, nor does it *become* the other. Each part of creation was made unique and after its own kind, special. And yet, each part is incomplete without the whole, and everything is being and becoming in relationship to and with the other. The writer of this creation account has given us a record of the most beautiful dance ever danced, the most engaging song ever sung, the most intimate sculpture ever made; and yet it is so much more than any one of these. It is the essence of harmony and balance.

The celestials regulate the balance of the terrestrials. The night dusk comes to softly compel all creation to enter into rest and the calm brings about refreshing coolness to the world. The advent of the day provides new life and new opportunities like the embrace of warmth for plants, animals, and humans. The moon regulates all the waters. The sun regulates each season. The seasons regulate all creation on the earth and in the sky as annual activities; bears hibernate, and birds migrate, and people store wood and food for the winter and plant seeds in the spring. Everything created is in harmony and balance with everything else and with the Creator. The first week of creation is a grand picture of shalom on the earth.

From God's purview there is an interconnectedness of all God has made. All things are designed and created beautifully by their Creator. Each part of the created whole bears the mark of its Creator. Each element works in relationship with all the others. Each ingredient is connected through its common origin and, together, all share a common location in

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

the universe; and when God is finished with creation there is a pause on the seventh day. Not a pause as if to look back and second-guess, but an intentional pause to celebrate the way it is. The Aboriginal Rainbow Elders in Australia say the Creator sang on the seventh day. The meaning is like that of a gathering or a community “get-together” where celebration is the only priority. The celebration is a party because everything is harmonious as it was meant to be. This is God’s shalom creation party. Though told in slightly different ways, many indigenous peoples around the world are able to recognize this story, and this pause, as the Harmony Way.

In first-century Judea, the apostle Paul also recognizes the universality of the creation story and uses it as a backdrop for how Christ brings all things together in harmony. Paul borrows the energy from the idea of the artful exuberance God has for creation when referencing the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

In Ephesians chapter 2 the apostle seems to understand something about humanity “mirroring” the good works of creation with our own good works. According to Paul, we, as humans, are participants in the continuation of creation by manifesting good in our world. As we do good in Christ, harmony is restored, or as Paul calls it, “reconciliation.” The culmination of the reconciliation process that Paul references is shalom (v. 14).

I think that in Paul’s mind the idea of God’s shalom is not divorced from creation, but as we can plainly see from the earliest Genesis account, creation is central to our understanding of shalom. Creation (what God did and continues to do daily) and the carrying out of shalom (what we are to do daily) are inextricably interwoven. We have the opportunity each day to participate in God’s shalom activities. Among Native Americans, many tribes have a word or several words describing this same ancient Hebrew shalom reality. We may refer to the comprehension of and the commonalities of an ancient understanding of shalom simply as the Harmony Way.

Jesus as the Shalom Restorer of Justice and Dignity

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. . . . Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others — the armies of

Shalom and the Community of Creation

heaven — praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and [shalom] on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” (Luke 2:8-14)

The Creator has never abandoned these wonderful plans for the Harmony Way on earth. God certainly never intended shalom to be merely an after-earth reality! The Harmony Way is embedded in the created order and is meant to be lived out *on* earth by all creation. The Harmony Way, or shalom, is revealed deeply in Jesus’ life, even as a baby, with many of God’s creatures surrounding him at his entrance into the world.

Think about the reality of the story for a moment. With “no room in the inn,” the stables must have been pretty full. I have never farmed camels, but I have years of experience with horses, cows, sheep, goats, and chickens. The fact is, when crowded into a barn (or a cave) not only do all these animals not get along well, but they stink! And their stink together is not like the smell of a stew where all flavors blend to create a nice aroma. “Livestock Manure Stew” smells much worse than any one of them smells by itself. Now add humans to the mix! Not really a pleasant thought, eh? Please continue with me just a bit longer.

In the midst of this crowded, stinky place is a feed trough. Deep under the hay, as a result of all the animals’ noses constantly milling around, is where most of the grains have sifted to and piled up. The smarter animals (likely the goats and camels) move through the mulled-over hay and “mouth” their way to the bottom of the manger to find the grains. Exuding saliva, “sneeze juice,” and snot from their nostrils, the animals continue to dip their face toward the protein-rich grain like kids bobbing for apples. It is in this kind of a place where Jesus is born. The Creator becomes a helpless child and is born in a barn and placed in the feed trough. I wonder if Christ had expected such a throne when he created the world? Likely so, for God’s purposes are often so simple and obvious that we humans blunder all around them without ever recognizing them.

But modern humans may have the wrong idea about the birthplace of Jesus. The reality of the situation is that the Christ-child is born among those whom human beings regard the least. Pastoral people do value their animals, but they are still animals. Simple beasts of burden and future table food would never be thought of as central in a story of the Creator’s birth, or would they? Perhaps there was something about the Harmony Way that the beasts of burden, the domestic livestock, the doves and mice, fleas and flies, etcetera understood, since they become the first audience to the most

visible demonstration of God's restoring life on earth back to the Creator's original intentions.

In Luke's account, after he grants domestic animals front-row seating, the lowly shepherds appear next on the invited guest list. While shepherd imagery was used in the Hebrew Testament to show God's care for God's people, it had lost much of its immediacy by the first century, especially around urban centers such as Jerusalem. Shepherding was among the occupations whose testimony was not allowed in a court of law,¹ and that is why the Creator saw fit for shepherds to be the first humans to receive the news of Christ's birth. It was only fitting for the announcement of the restoration of shalom on earth to be made to those whom society deemed untrustworthy. In such an act, the justice of shalom restores the dignity of the shepherds. But why were the shepherds degraded to such a low state in the first place?

Though I am making a calculated guess, I think I may have an answer. My answer came to me only after years of self-decolonization, but any colonized group might have come up with a similar understanding. My guess is that after years of struggling in court over ancient land rights that were being trampled by urban development, the wealthy developers, and those who had invested in the urban growth system, won their rights unjustly over the seemingly insignificant shepherds. The easiest path to secure such illegitimate rights was to prevent shepherds from testifying in court altogether. This pattern is all too familiar among indigenous people who face colonization and so-called development. A similar course of action was pursued by the Euro-Americans for centuries, beginning with John Winthrop and the earliest Pilgrims who annulled any Native claims to the land by declaring Indian rights illegal. "The Indians," he said, "had not 'subdued' the land, and therefore had only a 'natural' right to it, but not a 'civil right.' A 'natural right' did not have legal standing."²

Regardless of the reason for such unjust laws, for a time in the Creator's court, the shepherds were given exclusive rights to witness an event that even kings were prevented from seeing. The shepherds' testimony is valuable to the gospel story. The restoration of their dignity becomes central to God's Harmony Way purposes on earth because shalom always re-

1. See Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables: A Landmark Work in New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966).

2. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 13-14.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

stores dignity to the most marginalized of society. Depending on which Gospel account we read, other characters were also present at the birth of Jesus.

The Wise Men, who were Gentiles, were invited to partake in God's special Harmony Way event. Seen by many Jews as unworthy, these famous Gentiles' pilgrimage may have been recorded in order to convey a strong message to the "chosen" of Israel that everyone, from every nation (including the animal nations), is chosen and loved by God. The foundational principle of the community of creation is reaffirmed over and over again by Jesus during his ministry, even to the disdain of his own village (see Luke 4:17ff.).³ Furthermore, God has always accepted the Gentiles. The Hebrew Scriptures attest to the idea that each nation has its own relationship with the Creator; for example, in Amos 9:7 we read, "'Are you Israelites more important to me than the Ethiopians?' asks the Lord. 'I brought Israel out of Egypt, but I also brought the Philistines from Crete and led the Arameans out of Kir'" (NLT).

Clearly, in Jesus is found the message that living out shalom means that no one person, occupation, or nation is more important to God than another. Understanding the shalom of God in Christ means that the God of Israel is actively involved in the care for, and the plight of, all other peoples. Jesus understood his shalom ministry on earth in this universal light and as a result of this understanding, he most often "hung" with tax gatherers, women of all sorts, the untouchables, and sometimes Gentiles. Even Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus' paternal lineage includes women (a

3. The usual argument for the temporary exclusion of Gentiles from Jesus' ministry includes the direct statement Jesus makes while dealing with the Canaanite woman whose daughter needed healing, by responding to her that he was "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 15:22-28). If we ignore the irony with which Jesus often spoke during such occasions, we might miss the juxtaposition of Jesus' response with that of his disciples, who preferred that she be sent away. Jesus' pattern of accepting women, Gentiles, and others while others urge him to reject them is clear throughout his ministry. Often Jesus' dialogical bantering comes with his initial resistance but culminates with the person obtaining his or her request. To understand Jesus' ministry in a light contrary to the inclusion of the Gentiles is inconsistent with his numerous dialogical forays that always resulted in his acceptance of lepers, beggars, prostitutes, Samaritans, and Gentiles. An anemic understanding of Jesus' attempt to put off the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 would be particularly troubling in Matthew, given that the writer begins Jesus' lineage with "an introductory genealogy that includes four foreign women, and the conclusion provides mission discourse that contemplates disciples from any nation." Mark Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield, U.K.: Phoenix Press, 2008), 144.

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

widow and a prostitute) who are from foreign nations (Matt. 1:5). By the end of his life, the very story of Jesus' resurrection would depend on the testimony of women, another part of Judean society whose word was not trusted in the legal system.

Indeed, it was women who were given the power from the Creator to create life, including the life of Jesus, the Christ-child from Mary. Mary, the virgin, brought forth life in the same way the first human is brought forth from the virgin soil. This act is nothing new. In many of our indigenous stories Mother Earth brings forth humans and the Creator breathes life into them. In the Jewish-Christian continuance, mother Mary brings forth the Second Adam with the life-seed of the Creator. The restoration of the dignity of women is a central theme in a shalom trajectory. Jesus drew women around himself in order for them to understand that they too had the privilege and responsibility to become disciples, teachers, prophets, and apostles in God's shalom way. And it was women who would eventually have the honor to be the first to bring the testimony of Jesus' resurrection from the tomb. Without the restoration of the central role of women, there could have been no virgin birth. Without women, there could be no creation.

Intimate, Animate, and Sacred

Jesus' birth, and his whole life, was connected to all aspects of creation, from the animals in the stable, to the wheat in the field, to the grapes and figs in the vineyard, to the marginalized people of society. His worldview was one that understood the earth to be sacred. As my friend Bo Sanders reminded me once, the stories told by Jesus are primarily about creation. Jesus spoke primarily of birds, crops, fields, fruit, fish, water, light, trees, livestock, relationships, and so on. His worldview was creation-centered and not particularly mechanistic. Jesus, as a carpenter, could have just as easily spent his time reflecting on the importance of a mechanistic worldview by sharing stories referring primarily to wheels, chariots, shields, how mills operate, how the legal system operates, and so on. Our record indicates that Jesus spoke from and of the world to which he related best, that of creation — the world he himself formed.

In the western world we must remind ourselves that the Scriptures are written from a worldview that does not easily categorize creation into animate and inanimate realities. To Jesus, all of creation was alive. Jesus felt

Shalom and the Community of Creation

comfortable in relating to, and conversing with, what the western mind often calls inanimate. Jesus finds himself in situations that most Euro-western people would summarily discount. Jesus locates schools of fish and donkeys when needed; he borrows a coin from the mouth of a fish; he speaks to storms; he walks on water; he curses trees; and so on. And notice, the narratives do not suggest that anyone judges him a witch or something worse because of his view of creation.⁴ The people around Jesus shared a similar worldview. Jesus, like so many in his day, was comfortable in a constant conversation with natural creation. He was not estranged from creation in the way most of us in the western world are today. By and large, moderns no longer live in close contact with the natural world or make their livings through dependency upon creation. Dependence on the comforts of modernity has caused us to drop the once-natural connection to creation.

Once upon a time in America, fishermen knew how to read the skies; sailors navigated by the stars; crops were planted and harvested according to the moon and upon naturally calculated estimations of rain and sun. In the modern world only the local weather person now makes his or her living based upon predicting nature. Most of us live insulated from the conversation with creation that Jesus and many of the biblical writers held daily.

Jesus, though he showed respect for Jerusalem, considered the whole created world to be sacred. According to Jesus, creation was considered so sacred that it was not to be demeaned by using it in an oath. Consider Matthew 5:34b-35a, for example, where he references the sacred earth: “Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool.”⁵ Other accounts, throughout the Psalms, Wisdom literature, and such, reveal the sacredness and the value of the creation to the Creator and to humans. Consider just two out of hundreds of examples. Here is the first:

Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.
Without having any chief

4. The Pharisees called Jesus demon possessed because of his view of God, not because of his view of creation.

5. Granted, the context in this excerpt is to not just say you will do something but to actually do what you say you will do. Still, one would have a difficult time arguing that Jesus did not consider the heavens and the earth sacred after examining such a statement.

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

or officer or ruler,
it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.
How long will you lie there, O lazybones?
When will you rise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want, like an armed warrior. (Prov. 6:6-11)

The ants appears to be a continual source of inspiration, modeling for us how we should govern ourselves and manage our lives concerning our economic activities. This example also reveals an important aspect of shalom. The point should not be overlooked concerning how closely the principles of this short proverb align with the whole Sabbath system as shown in Leviticus 25. As I mentioned in chapter one, on the Sabbath day every person, ox, donkey, horse, and such, is to rest. All necessary labor is to be accomplished prior to the Sabbath so that people are free to rest. The seventh year was also to be observed as a year of Sabbath. Israel was to divide the land into seven sections. Each year one section of land was to be left to rejuvenate, and edges of fields were to be left for the poor to glean. Sowing and reaping crops were forbidden in the seventh year, so the poor and the animals could eat. It was a year of rest for the land. This meant a more disciplined and intentional approach to planning. Poor planning for a day might result in temporary hunger from a missed meal. Poor planning for a year could be disastrous for the planter and for the extreme poor who, through their dependency, would ultimately benefit from the planter's labor. The example of the ants shows humans how to trust the provisions of God. The ants store up for a time when they cannot work; Sabbath requires similar trust.

Another example of the sacred value of creation is found in Job 12:7-10. This amplified version draws us into a clear understanding of this passage.

For ask now the animals, and they will teach you [that God does not deal with His creatures according to their character]; ask the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth [with its other forms of life], and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare [this truth] to you. Who [is so blind as] not to recognize in all these [that good and evil are promiscuously scattered throughout nature

Shalom and the Community of Creation

and human life] that it is God's hand which does it [and God's way]? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.

In this passage Job is admonishing one of his accusers to:

- talk to animals and then be taught from them
- talk to and listen to birds
- talk to the earth and other creation and expect to be taught from them
- listen to fish attest to the truth
- and, if you can't recognize God's hand in all creation, the implication is that you are blind!

These kinds of images can be disturbing to Euro-western minds that insist on assigning concepts like *inanimate* to living creation.⁶ If a person's worldview negates them from being intimately connected in a reciprocal relationship to creation, the words of Job may appear foolish. And yet, there is nothing that seems inanimate about anything Job mentions. To Job, the animals, birds, fish, and the earth are all alive. So often people jump to accusations of animism or anthropomorphism when these kinds of scriptures are discussed, but according to the Scriptures, not only are the animals made from the same earthly clay as humans, but the same sacred breath in humans also resides in creation.⁷

If we try to read the Scriptures through the worldview of the biblical authors, Euro-western categories may be inadequate in helping to understand humanity's relationships to creation. Modern Euro-western categories most often have human beings over and above the rest of creation. Several scriptures should give us pause to rethink the way we view our own human superiority.

I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so

6. Some languages assign gender in speech to categories while many others assign animacy. Assigning animacy goes much deeper than linguistic taxonomic structure. Some languages, like the Cherokee language, divide animacy between animals and plants but still contain ceremonies requiring the adherent to address the plants in speech. Cherokees also retain stories in which plants are speaking, making decisions, having feelings, etc.

7. Genesis 1:30; 7:15; Psalm 33:6; 150:6.

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.” (Eccles. 3:18-20 NLT)

In Genesis, the second creation account suggests that the first man is lonely without a companion. What happens next is amazing! “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.’ So the LORD God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of the sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no helper just right for him” (Gen. 2:18-20 NLT). Cree theologian Ray Aldred suggests that the birds and animals are mentioned because an intimate relationship between humans and creation is already assumed.⁸ The animals in the story are formed out of the same earth as humans, sharing the same mother earth and father God as human beings. The story then tells us that the man names the animals, again suggesting the intimacy of shared relationship and interdependence.

I would suggest that less relational views of reciprocity between humans and creation are modern misunderstandings, and they have everything to do with modern humanity’s alienation from creation. As global development and urbanization continue, humans continue to lose their contact with the earth and her creatures. We find ourselves staring out of windows, looking at concrete, brick, and blacktop more often than we find ourselves standing in fields or forest and observing other parts of creation in the way Jesus did.

The artificial reality created by modernity places us in a world where human achievement is heralded as the pinnacle of beauty, wisdom, and inspiration. In our current worldview, human achievement, not God’s creation, is seen as life’s normative experience. One obvious example of Christianity’s embrace of modernity, with incredible theological consequences, is the design of church buildings. Christian churches have adopted the practice of shutting creation out of their worship services rather than incorporating architectural designs that allow creation — God’s first discourse of inspiration, wisdom, and beauty — to catch worshipers’ attention and inspire them to recognize the Creator through the creation.

8. “Theology of the Land Conference,” George Fox University, during a panel discussion consisting of the author, Ray Aldred, and Richard Twiss, February 7, 2011.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

Church sanctuaries are enclosed, often without windows; or if they have windows, people color them with stained glass as if our human works of art could be greater than God's natural artistry.

As we move along the trajectory of modern history we seem to value the sacredness of creation less. Today, the natural world has become unfamiliar and even strange to us. Most of the thoughts we entertain concerning what we reference as "nature" are now twisted toward thoughts of chores, hunting excursions, and recreation in which we *challenge* nature and ultimately *conquer* nature (as if we could conquer God's creation!). Examples of failed disaster cleanups, such as in Valdez, Alaska, or the more recent Gulf oil spill, should teach us that nature cannot be easily conquered. But creation can be destroyed.

As modern humans continue our mass extraction of the earth's resources, including water, oil, coal, trees, metals, and minerals, we are failing to realize that we are reaching a tipping point. Humanity should have learned its lessons from the plight of the dodo and the passenger pigeon. When some things on earth are exploited too long, they can never recover. But in our modern world human greed does not take into account such boundaries.

As people of faith, we should view every drop of oil, every diamond, every lump of coal, and every source of water with a theological eye. We should try seeing our world through the eyes of the One who created it. All the earth is sacred. It seems quite foolish that only after we have gone too far will we realize that no amount of capital gains, no particular economic system, no modern convenience will be worth the price that we will be forced to pay. Attributed as a Cree Indian proverb, around Indian country they say, "Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realize we cannot eat money."⁹ I sometimes wonder if modern humanity will drive itself to extinction over greed.

Modern, Euro-western, hierarchical worldviews set humanity up, over and above the rest of creation. In such a view it makes no sense to become intimate with creation. Taking time from our busy schedules in order to learn from animals, birds, fish, trees, earth, or a river seems very "unnatural" and artificial in our modern world. To the Euro-western mind nature is to be feared, conquered, killed, or utilized for its material value; it is never to be viewed as intimately related to us or sacred. While creation

9. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Native-American-Indian-Wisdom/298826369043?sk=info>, accessed last on May 31, 2011.

may elicit inspirational feelings in people, to the Euro-western mind, animals, birds, water, and earth are rarely seen as the start of a continuous conversation with the Creator. The western view of creation has proven to be pitifully anthropocentric and utilitarian. Christianity has simply followed suit.

The Futility of Utility

At some level everyone enjoys the beauty found in creation. But even within an inspired view, I often hear people express a creation theology reflective of human-centered utility. In a utilitarian worldview nature is predominately thought of as being made for the purposes surrounding human function or for human pleasure. This type of assumption can even be expressed in heartfelt thoughts of God, in an attitude of thankfulness for God creating our world. No doubt such views are a part of God's purpose or we would not enjoy nature so much, but at the end of the day such views are more about differentiation between us and nature, over and above any kind of relational affiliation with creation. In some great reversal of rationale, modern humanity now thinks of creation primarily in terms of what it does for us, rather than seeing it as an inspiration for us to think of the greatness of God.

My friend Jim Sequeira told me about an experience he had when visiting an artist's store just off the beach in Southern California. Jim had spent a great deal of time admiring the artist's work, but then he had to admit to the artist that he could not afford to buy any of his beautiful art. "That's okay," replied the artist. "While it's true I make a living by selling my art, what I really enjoy is watching people admire it." Undoubtedly, the Creator makes "good stuff" so we can enjoy it. But aesthetic beauty is not the only reason for creation.

Regardless of whether one counts days or millennia in Genesis chapter 1, humans are still the final characters to show up in the story. Coming in last place should give us all pause for creaturely humility. We should realize that everything created was not made primarily for human happiness. Obviously, creation was enjoyed prior to our arrival. Consider the fact that there are places in the depth of the oceans, on the highest mountains, and deep in space that human beings have never seen and likely never will. Such unreachable places seem to be reserved for the Creator's enjoyment and for other beings in creation — but not for humans.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

Creation exists for far more than our pleasure. In fact, if things continue down the road they are on, it will be easy to imagine a world operating in its fullness, but without the human beings that once inhabited it. Our anthropocentric worldviews can hardly bear the thought of the world not revolving around us. Though it should be said again, like all the other parts of creation, humans have an important place of connectedness to, for, and with creation. Part of our role is that of a protector and restorer of creation. I suggest we take our role more seriously if we are to continue living on this planet.

By following the Genesis chapter 1 creation story in its context, we can see that there is an obvious relationship between the Creator, the earth, human beings, animals, birds, plants, waters, and so on. As I pointed out earlier, the God who took time to create and observe natural goodness in its fullness also remains with creation. God doesn't abandon any of creation to be left on its own. After all, why would one create and hang a beautiful painting, never to take a second look?

In a similar fashion to the Genesis chapter 1 account, the writer of Psalm 148 (NLT) slowly unpacks and seems to enjoy what God has made.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens!

Praise him from the skies!

Praise him, all his angels!

Praise him, all the armies of heaven!

Praise him, sun and moon!

Praise him, all you twinkling stars!

Praise him, skies above!

Praise him, vapors high above the clouds!

Let every created thing give praise to the LORD,

for he issued his command, and they came into being.

He set them in place forever and ever.

His decree will never be revoked.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you creatures of the ocean depths,

fire and hail, snow and clouds,

wind and weather that obey him,

mountains and all hills,

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all livestock,
small scurrying animals and birds,
kings of the earth and all people,
rulers and judges of the earth,
young men and young women,
old men and children.

Let them all praise the name of the LORD.
For his name is very great;
his glory towers over the earth and heaven!
He has made his people strong,
honoring his faithful ones —
the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the LORD!

The psalmist reflects the Creator's enjoyment by recognizing the many aspects of how God is seen and glorified through creation. Each line reminds us to be thankful for such great gifts. It is truly humbling to know that God wants to share creation's beauty with us as we take the time to watch the beauty of creation unfold around us.

Native Americans have constructs similar to the scriptural examples of thanksgiving that honor the Creator for what he has done. One of those prayers, the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address has been formalized, and had I the space I would share all of it with you. In it, you would notice the great similarities in recognizing and enjoying each part of creation. The prayer representatively addresses every element of creation such as the people, the earth, the waters, the stars, the winds, and the birds; and at the end of each thought says "now our minds are one." Here is just one section of the long prayer:

The Animals: We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we hope that it will always be so. Now our minds are one.¹⁰

10. 1993, provided here courtesy of Six Nations Indian Museum and the Tracking Proj-

Shalom and the Community of Creation

Neither Native Americans, nor any indigenous peoples for that matter, have exclusive claims on understanding and relating to creation. Certainly there have been people in every generation, in all parts of the world, who attest to the Creator's witness through creation. Saint Francis of Assisi, who walked the earth in the early twelfth century, was one such European. Known as the patron saint of animals, Francis is reported to have preached to birds and negotiated an agreement with a ravenous wolf. Here is a portion of his *Canticle of the Sun*:

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name. Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness. Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful. Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance. Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure. Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong. Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.¹¹

The psalmists, the writer of Genesis chapter 1, Saint Francis, and Native American prayers all seem to agree that the Creator has made a good

ect, *Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Natural World*, <http://www.thetrackingproject.org/peacemaking/trackingtheroots.htm>, last accessed on May 31, 2011. English version: John Stokes and Kanawahienton (David Benedict, Turtle Clan/Mohawk). Mohawk version: Rokwaho (Dan Thompson, Wolf Clan/Mohawk). Original inspiration: Tekaronianekon (Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan/Mohawk). Thanksgiving Address Fund, c/o Tracking Project, P.O. Box 266, Corrales, New Mexico 87048.

11. <http://www.webster.edu/~barrettb/canticle.htm>, last accessed on May 31, 2011.

world in which we are to live, be connected to, and thoroughly enjoy. God's first discourse is always present in creation, but the critical question in our generation is really more about how we are to live in God's world. The question is of infinite concern. How we view our role determines our answer. Is the world made for us or are we made as just one part of the creation? We must be careful how we answer because there may be a tendency for those who view creation primarily in a utilitarian way, to also view other people in a utilitarian way.

Ultimately, a utilitarian view of creation results in wanton destruction of the earth for the purposes of material gain. This attitude often crosses the realm of nature to people. A highly utilitarian view of people may explain why human life is valued so little in businesses that poison humanity (usually the poor and communities of color). Our view of creation may determine why international trade is accompanied by a propensity toward violence, wars, and even genocide. Invariably, the poorest and most marginalized on earth suffer the most from corporate imperialism's gathering of the earth's resources. Such actions often result in wholesale racism and injustice toward ethnic minorities. If diversity in creation is not understood and appreciated by those in the modern world, then perhaps it is not difficult to see why diversity would be of any value when considering others in humanity. There is a definite connection.

North American indigenous views and ancient Semitic worldviews, as represented in Scripture, find agreement in the understanding that creation is sacred. To the indigenous peoples of North America, our land and all it contains is *the* Holy Land. The land is sacred (holy) because it was given to us from the Creator, to be held in a trust relationship. The land is holy because God is holy. It is sacred because the land, and all creation, is considered to be a gift from God. Christians ought to be the first ones to realize this — after all, Christ is the Creator.

The Creator-Son and Reconciler

According to several writers in the Second Testament, Jesus is recognized as the Creator. The structure of those references to Christ as Creator are all possibly in a formulaic style, meaning they might have been memorized as poetic forms or sung as hymns. These formulaic patterns suggest that the early understanding of Christ as Creator was a popular theme in the early church. Here is the disciple John's account.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. (John 1:1-4 NLT)

In John's mind, Jesus is preexistent; Jesus is God; Jesus was God's instrument in creation; and Jesus gave life to all creation. In the same chapter, verses 10-14 speak of God's redemptive value in Christ. John, who walked with Jesus, seems to have a fluid understanding of Jesus the man and Jesus the preexistent Christ as Creator. John also understands the very same Jesus as the Redeemer of all things. In a similar formulaic pattern to John's reference, Paul writes,

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see — such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. (Col. 1:15-20 NLT)

In the Colossians passage Paul understands:

- Christ as the representative God
- Christ as preexistent
- Christ as having supremacy over all creation
- Christ as God's instrument in creation
- All creation as being created by Christ
- All creation made for Christ
- Christ making shalom with all creation by his redemptive atonement.

Paul's understanding parallels John's understanding of Christ the human, Christ the Creator, and Christ the Redeemer — or as Paul says else-

God's First Discourse: Connected to Creation

where, Christ the reconciler of all things. Paul references another formulaic description of Christ as Creator in 1 Corinthians 8:6: “But we know that there is only one God, the Father, who created everything, and we live for him. And there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom God made everything and through whom we have been given life” (NLT). Once again, Paul states that through Jesus Christ, God made all creation, and through Christ we all have life.

A fourth reference, possibly constructed in the same or at least a similar kind of song, poem, or formula, is found in the book of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. (Heb. 1:1-2 NLT)

The writer of Hebrews begins by reasoning that, through Christ, God created all of creation and that all creation belongs to him. Later, the same writer (Heb. 2:10) ties the creation act to Christ's redemptive actions by saying, “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (ESV).

In this great mystery of incarnation and redemption, those who walked with or near the incarnated Christ came to a clear understanding that he was also the orchestrator of creation.¹² It may have even been common for many of the writers of the Second Testament to view Jesus as an incarnate human, as Christ the efficacious Creator, and as Christ the ultimate shalom, the one who restores all things and in whom all things are restored. Western theology has traditionally shown a weak understanding of Jesus as Creator. I would suggest that without a better understanding of God's plan through Jesus Christ as both Creator and as Savior/Restorer-Redeemer (shalom bringer), we in the modern church may have overzealously developed an imbalanced salvation theology.

The Creator of *all things* is also the redeemer or reconciler of *all things*, and *all things* (read all creation) are being created for Christ. Paul, in the Colossians passage, even says Christ “holds *all things together*.” It may be said that since *all things* are redeemable in Christ, then restoring the world

12. For a more complete historical theology, see Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Shalom and the Community of Creation

to shalom is the point of Christ's redemption. The basic issue is the breadth of healing God has made available in Christ. If Jesus died for all creation, and not just the human "soul," and not even just for humans, then the concept of redemption is much broader than many Christians have traditionally thought. Redemption (our salvation) is for the whole earth.

In the Cherokee language we have a phrase that points to Jesus as the *Creator-Son*.¹³ This linguistic construction references Jesus' sonship, in relation to the Father, while at the same time referencing his role in creation. In this simple formula Jesus is acknowledged as both divine Creator and divine Son. The implications of embracing this broader understanding, of Christ as the one who creates all things and as the one who restores all things, has tremendous missional significance.

Monotheistic peoples have prayed to the Creator of all things for millennia without ever knowing the Second Testament claim that Jesus Christ is the historic Creator. Put simply, if indigenous peoples have been praying to the Creator and the Creator is Christ, to whom have they been praying? Asked in another way, since there exist among indigenous peoples numerous testimonies of the Creator's intervention and blessing in their lives, with whom have they been in relationship?

Certainly a broader missional view would have been good news to such people. Instead, indigenous peoples were most often told by Euro-western missionaries that they worshiped another god. One also wonders what has been the effect of a theology that separates the Creator-Son and Savior/Restorer of all things? Such an imbalance has prevented western theologians from understanding a broader view of salvation and has helped maintain a dualism that prevents people from understanding that all creation, together, comes under the covering of Christ's universal restoration.

Based on the past missional perspectives, the result of such an imbalanced theology is apparent — a weak salvation theology equals a weak god. A weak god is not great enough to reach all peoples everywhere or able to restore all creation. The god of western mission has too often been capricious, carrying with him an exceptionalist theology that favors the categories and conclusions of the Euro-western world. Perhaps God is greater than the west has presumed. There is nowhere that we can travel, including the depths of the ocean or outer space, where Christ is not active in creation. It would seem that part of our job on earth is to discover what Christ is up to, and to join him in it!

13. *Oo-nay-thla-nah-hee Yo-way-jee.*

Mapping Out Creation's Future

Today is a new day of theological possibilities. New possibilities are arising as our former, weaker theological categories are being reexamined by nonwestern eyes and minds. Nonwestern peoples are discovering that the theologies bent toward a western doctrinal trajectory may limit the big-ness of God and who God is in Jesus Christ. Indigenous peoples have been told for centuries that our historic relationship to the Creator was suspect at best, and demonic at worst. It is time to remove the log from the western hegemonic theological enterprise, prior to removing the splinter from nonwestern and indigenous theological constructs. Brave new theological partnerships and open minds are needed for the twenty-first century. If we wish to live out shalom together (Euro-west and non-west), we must realize we are all on a journey together with Christ to heal the world. The caveat is, we must all be willing to put down our “pet” theologies, because they are embedded in the traditions of the west.

Pope John Paul II came to a startling realization: “Over the years I have become more and more convinced that the ideologies of evil are profoundly rooted in the history of European philosophical thought.”¹⁴ The anthropocentric dualism between material and spiritual reality, as widely understood in the Euro-western world, has fed into the idea of a disposable earth and disposable societies. That is, Euro-western dualism has produced an attitude that “as long as it is not my society, my community, or my family experiencing the ramifications, I can ignore it.” Even western ecological worldviews, as helpful as they can be under certain circumstances, may not offer anything better in the end than social narcissism.

There are a number of hurdles that the western world and worldviews will need to clear in order to preserve creation and find shalom in the community of creation. These hurdles include:

- the Platonic and Cartesian dualisms that lead us to value reason over experience, and the spiritual over the “secular” or the material, etc.
- the oppressive pedagogies that promote dualistic tenets
- extrinsic categorization over relational categorization that leads to creating false realities removed from the whole

14. Fr. James V. Schall, S.J., “Benedict on Aquinas: ‘Faith Implies Reason,’” February 1, 2007, http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/print2007/schall_b16aquinas_febo7.html, last accessed on May 31, 2011.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

- a “progressive” view of civilization that understands ancient peoples to be less civilized than modern peoples
 - an anthropocentric worldview where humans dominate nature
 - neocolonialism, which includes economic coercion and military violence as a substitute for true, democratic, relationally based authority
 - individual greed, expressed through unbridled and unchecked capitalism, which has led to the commodification of people and natural resources, including land, water, and even air, over the interest of the common good of all
 - twofold judgments, which have been defined as follows:

A special characteristic of western thinking, fully reflected in American ways, is that of making twofold judgments based on principle. The structure of the Indo-European languages seems to foster this kind of thinking and the action that follows. A situation is assigned to a category held high, thus providing a justification for positive effort, or to one held low, with justification for rejection, avoidance, or other negative action. Twofold judgments seem to be the rule in western and American life: moral-immoral, legal-illegal, right-wrong, sin-virtue, success-failure, clean-dirty, civilized-primitive, practical-impractical, introvert-extrovert, and secular-religious, Christian-pagan. This kind of thinking tends to put the world of values into absolutes, and its arbitrary nature is indicated by the fact that modern science no longer uses opposite categories, in almost all instances preferring to use the concept of a range with degrees of difference separating the poles.¹⁵

Many of the existing forms of the environmental movement will be helpful in the short run, but unless they become rooted in a familial love of creation, I fear that they are simply representing a sanitized version of utilitarianism. As Tracy Chapman’s song reminds us, we are related to the earth, and the earth is our mother: “Mother of us all / Place of our birth / How can we stand aside / And watch the rape of the world.”¹⁶

Whether the term “Mother Earth” is helpful in a literal way or as a

15. Conrad M. Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff, “American Cultural Values,” in Conrad M. Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff, eds., *Introducing Social Change* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1971), 210-14.

16. From “Rape of the World” by Tracy Chapman, from the album, “New Beginning,” copyright 1995.

metaphor, the logical relationship is present; we all come from the earth and to the earth we will all return. When all human beings lose this sense of commonality, we lose our balance and our humanity. When the colonizers forget their relationship to the earth (perhaps through philosophical parsing or simply callousness), it gives them a powerful weapon over those they intend to colonize. Native author Andrea Smith, in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, makes the case for the unjust use of power during colonization of Native American lands, paralleling the power used to assert rights over Native American bodies. John Mohawk, *Thinking in Indian: A John Mohawk Reader* (edited by Jose Barreiro), colors the language with the idea of torturing the land and torturing the people. When one group of humans neglects to think about the earth as our mother, even while knowing that another group views it as such, they can for a while rape, kill, and torture the very root of a people's existence. Unfortunately, regardless of their state of mind, they are doing the same thing to themselves as well.

The apostle Paul uses the concept of the earth as our mother in Romans 8:22. "For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (NLT). Without breaking through the dualistic Euro-western categories, many environmentalists will continue to view creation as something apart from themselves. Such views are more about sustaining nature for prolonged use and not as much about a familial relationship with creation. With that said, there are some similarities to indigenous ideas and ideologies of earthkeeping found in environmental movements like Deep Ecology/Ecosophy. For example, I find some agreement among indigenous views and ecosophical views, including understandings that:

- All life is interconnected and reciprocal.
- Human beings have a symbiotic relationship with creation.
- Life is biocentric *in that* each part has a role to play in the natural relationship of harmony.
- Creation teaches values for living and learning.
- We can appreciate the quality of life we enjoy without needing to move toward higher standards (a.k.a. "progress").

Indigenous views may differ from Deep Ecology in the following understandings:

Shalom and the Community of Creation

- Creation exists because of a Creator or Sacred Force (the Great Mystery).
- Life is intrinsically valuable *because* it is a gift from the Creator and therefore it is sacred, meaning that purpose is crucial to existence.
- Life is not *just* biocentric; it also has a slightly anthropocentric side. The role of human beings is unique, and humans relate to the rest of creation uniquely. This view might be described as *ministrocentric*¹⁷ (centered on serving creation, maintaining harmony, assuring reciprocity, and conducting ceremonies of mediation, etc., in order to maintain harmony and restore harmony whenever it is broken). This includes restoring harmony through gratitude, reciprocity, and ceremony between the Creator, humans, and all other parts of creation.
- Creation does not exist to be in isolation, but creation is the Creator's first discourse — in which humanity has a seat of learning and in which the discourse is continuous.
- Harmony is not simply understood as a philosophy among most indigenous; it is more about how life operates, and it is the only way that life can continue, if life is to be lived as the Creator intends.

Postmodern and Indigenous

We are now at a point in human history when we must realize that modernity, in all its forms, especially as expressed in the Euro-western world, was “Dead On Arrival.” The industrial age and neocolonialism, following the era of colonialism, have written a check to our world that has insufficient funds. We are doomed if we don't change our course. Only a worldview encompassing the interconnectedness between Creator, human beings, and the rest of creation as one family is adequate. Such a worldview is fundamentally indigenous and biblical. Our survival as a people on this planet may depend on its adoption. If we are wise, we will follow the lead of indigenous peoples who are bringing forth empowering movements, such as Bolivia's proposed “Law of Mother Earth.” At the time of this writing, Bolivia is set to be the first nation to enact a law giving the earth similar rights as humans.

The country, which has been pilloried by the U.S. and Britain in the U.N. climate talks for demanding steep carbon emission cuts, will es-

17. *Ministro*, meaning to serve, wait upon, provide, supply.

establish 11 new rights for nature. They include: the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered. Controversially, it will also enshrine the right of nature “to not be affected by mega-infrastructure and development projects that affect the balance of ecosystems and the local inhabitant communities.” “It makes world history. Earth is the mother of all,” said Vice-President Alvaro García Linera. “It establishes a new relationship between man and nature, the harmony of which must be preserved as a guarantee of its regeneration.”¹⁸

The “Law of Mother Earth,” as it is being called, grew out of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April 2010. The gathering was a response to the failure of the climate talks in Copenhagen to allow the world’s indigenous voices to be heard during the 15th United Nations Conference in December 2009. Proposals for U.N. adoption of laws protecting the earth were presented a year after the Cochabamba gathering. Bolivia is one of many struggling countries trying to deal with its weather anomalies such as rising temperatures, melting glaciers, numerous floods, droughts, and mudslides. Bolivia, like many other nations (including the U.S.) is a battleground country between the rights of indigenous peoples, especially landless peoples, and a corrupt and violent Corporate State. It is no accident that a law to protect Mother Earth arose after the election of Evo Morales, Latin America’s first indigenous president.

I understand the single conceptual integration of land, history, religion, and culture may be difficult for many western minds to embrace. For Native Americans, this integration is often explained as a visceral “knowing” or as somehow embedded in our DNA. This feeling we have of ourselves as a people, including our history and cultures being connected to the land, is perhaps the single most glaring difference between a Euro-western worldview and an indigenous Native North American worldview. But if we are all to survive the twenty-first century, things must change,

18. This article was published on guardian.co.uk at 18.17 BST on Sunday, April 10, 2011. A version appeared on p. 15 of the main section of the *Guardian* on Monday, April 11, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/apr/10/bolivia-enshrines-natural-worlds-rights?INTCMP=SRCH>, last accessed on May 31, 2011.

Shalom and the Community of Creation

even among our Euro-western friends, so that they can sense a similar connection. How does such a paradigm shift happen?

All people must begin to view the earth as our mother, God as our Father, and all the creatures on the earth as our relatives. After all, we have the same Creator. Both shalom and the Native American Harmony Way make room for the kind of living that creates an atmosphere of respect in which these relationships can exist. God, through Christ, created the entire earth and everything in it. Everything in creation plays a part in the others' existence and well-being.

One of the most basic examples of this kind of reciprocity is how the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between plants and animals keeps us all living. So, in a simple paradigm, such as the symbiotic reciprocity between plants and the creation of oxygen, we naturally understand that all things created need each other in order to live in harmony. We are all related. What would our responsible role be in this simple example? Curb the cutting of the world's forests and develop sustainable alternatives.

Reciprocity is a natural law of the universe. For humans to maintain harmony, we must reflect the reciprocity in the created order. There is fluidity between understanding reciprocity between human beings and reciprocity of all other parts of creation. For example, concerning people: when we choose to help others in our community, it often comes back around to us. Likely, someone will end up helping us when we need it; but even if they don't, the reward is built into the initial act by how we feel when we help someone else. Mutuality and natural reciprocity are appreciated by understanding that all of creation operates according to this principle. Another way to say this is that in all of life there is a harmonious existence and an existence of chaos. Harmony is the action that restores the balance and subsumes the chaos.

"Action" should become an important word in Euro-western people's vocabulary in order to remind us of the intimate connection with creation, and to break dualistic thinking. Euro-western people might also consider developing new ways of expressing their thanks through ceremony. Through expressing gratitude in ceremonies, indigenous peoples reveal to others and themselves the connection between the Creator, human beings, the earth, and all the rest of creation. A foundation of Native American ceremony is gratitude for the relationships that exist. Euro-western people need to rediscover what their indigenous ancestors once knew and, in so many ways, become indigenous once again. To move ahead, and perhaps simply to survive, we must all be connected to creation in harmony.