

Celebrating the Season of Creation in Worship
A Webinar for Presbyterians for Earth Care
30 June 2022 *Slide 1*
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*What is the Season of Creation? **Slide 2***

A liturgical season
Usually in the fall (September)
Usually 4-6 weeks
Usually follows a set lectionary

I remember when I first heard about the Season of Creation – I was at the Conference on Worship, Theology, and the Arts in July, 2006 at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. The theme of the conference was “For the Fruit of All Creation” and I was taking a 5-day seminar in theology taught by Dr. Larry Rasmussen, who had recently retired from Union Theological Seminary. The title and subject of the seminar was “Earth-honoring Christian Faith” and this was the last day of what had been an amazing week of learning about Christianity as an earth-honoring faith.

Now, on the last day of the seminar, Dr. Rasmussen was sharing resources with us and told us that in Australia, the Lutheran Church had recently begun to celebrate a new four-week liturgical season they were calling the Season of Creation.

*Why a Season of Creation?? **Slide 3***

As Rasmussen explained the thinking behind this new Season of Creation, it made so much sense to me: the seasons of the church year are organized around the life of Jesus; and there is at least one feast day devoted to the Holy Spirit, and one to the Trinity, but no recognition of God as Creator. This was among the reasons for a Season of Creation, but there were more, one having to do with how people care for Creation, and the other having to do with how Creation informs people.

The first, and more obvious of these reasons has to do with the importance of caring for God’s creation, the centrality of Earth care as the original human vocation, and the bond between humans and Earth. Theologically, we are created from earth and called to serve the earth. The second creation account in Genesis tells us that the human, *adam*, was created from the humus, the rich earth soil, the *adamah*. In Genesis 2:15 the human is given the vocation to serve and preserve the earth (the traditional translation is “to till and care for” the earth, serve and preserve are also appropriate translations of the Hebrew). While in the first creation account, the humans are granted dominion over the earth, Jesus reminds us that those who rule are to serve (Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 9:33-35; Luke 22:25-26). In our era, science has assumed a prophetic role, and has led us to understand that far from serving and preserving Creation, humans are disrupting and threatening Earth and all that lives on it—from climate change to mass extinctions, the human impact on God’s good creation has been far from benign. Building more awareness of God as Creator into Christian worship can remind us of our vocation as stewards of creation.

The second reason has to do with the Bible as nature literature. The Bible is set in an agrarian culture, and was written by people with an intimate relationship to the natural world. Again and again, it uses nature in metaphors, similes, and as examples. A classic example of nature as metaphor is in the 23rd Psalm *slide 4*:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside still waters,
He restores my soul...

The 41st Psalm provides a wonderful example of simile: *slide 5*

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

The parables of Jesus are replete with images from nature; the parable of the sower is a perfect example (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8). Other examples would be his use of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field as recipients of God's care. Jesus wove the natural world into what he was saying again and again: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58)

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37)

I remember a time when I was horseback riding in the high desert country of Arizona with my brother who is a horse rancher there. We were riding in an area of mostly scrub oak bushes about four-foot-high and came upon a spot where in the midst of all the short scrub there was a tall green cottonwood tree, about 20 feet tall. I pointed it out to my brother, who commented, "Must be a spring there." Immediately, the opening verses of Psalm 1 came to my mind:

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

And I understood how the Psalm was suggesting that the person following God's way stands out from the crowd. I understood the psalm differently in that moment than I would have had I not seen the spring-fed tree standing tall above the scrub oak in the desert.

Providing time in the church year to remember God as Creator provides an opportunity to build a deeper awareness of the natural world so that church members might more fully appreciate Biblical literature.

A recent book by climate scientist Katherine Hayhoe suggests another reason to celebrate the Season of Creation. **Slide 6** Connecting with people through their deepest held values, and showing how those value

How did the Season of Creation come about? How does it work? **Slide 7**

The Season of Creation began in 2000 in Australia when Norman Habel, a Lutheran professor of Biblical Studies, worked within St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in South Adelaide to create a four-week celebration of Biblical creation stories. Over the next three years, he worked with the Uniting Church Commission for Mission in Melbourne to develop a Season of Creation. In 2004, about 50 congregations in the Uniting Church in Australia celebrated a four-week Season of Creation. In 2005, it was an option for churches across Australia, and congregations in other countries began to take note. **Slide 8** By 2006, when my congregation in Stevens Point, Wisconsin decided to try it out, other congregations in Canada, Europe, and the United States were becoming aware of it. The word quickly spread. The *Seasons of the Spirit* lectionary-based curriculum and worship resources published by Wood Lake Publishing in Canada has included the Season of Creation for several years, although they also offer access to a Revised Common Lectionary option.

The Season of Creation is usually celebrated during four Sundays in September. Sometimes a Blessing of the Animals is included. Each Sunday has its own theme, taken from the natural world. These are the themes and Biblical texts that have been developed for the three years (A, B, and C) to coordinate with the Revised Common Lectionary: **Slide 9**

Year A: the Spirit Series (Year of Matthew)

First Sunday in Creation: Forest Sunday

(Genesis 2:4b-22; Psalm 139:13-16; Acts 17:22-28; John 3:1-16)

Second Sunday in Creation: Land Sunday

(Genesis 3:14-19, 4:8-16; Psalm 139:7-12; Romans 5:12-17; Matthew 12:38-40)

Third Sunday in Creation: Outback/Wilderness Sunday

(Joel 1:8-10, 17-20; Ps. 18:6-19; Romans 8:18-27; Matthew 3:13-4:2 or Mark 1:9-13)

Fourth Sunday in Creation: River Sunday

(Genesis 8:20-22, 9:12-17; Psalm 104:27-33; Revelation 22:1-5; Matthew 28:1-10)

Year B: the Word Series (Year of Mark) **Slide 10**

First Sunday in Creation: Earth Sunday

(Genesis 1:1-25; Psalm 33:1-9; Romans 1:18-23; John 1:1-14)

Second Sunday in Creation: Humanity Sunday

(Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8; Philippians 2:1-8; Mark 10:41-45)

Third Sunday in Creation: Sky Sunday

(Jeremiah 4:23-28; Psalm 19:1-6; Philippians 2:14-18; Mark 15:33-39)

Fourth Sunday in Creation: Mountain Sunday

(Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 48:1-11; Romans 8:28-39; Mark 16:14-18)

Year C: the Wisdom Series (Year of Luke) **Slide 11**

First Sunday in Creation: Ocean Sunday

(Job 38:1-18; Psalm 104:1-9, 24-26; Ephesians 1:3-10; Luke 5:1-11)

Second Sunday in Creation: Fauna Sunday

(Job 39:1-8, 26-30; Psalm 104:14-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-19; Luke 12:22-31)

Third Sunday in Creation: Storm Sunday

(Job 28:20-27; Psalm 29; 1 Corinthians 1:20-31; Luke 8:22-25)

Fourth Sunday in Creation: Cosmos Sunday

(Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 148; Colossians 1:15-20; John 6:41-51)

Beyond these texts, one of the exciting dimensions of the Season of Creation for me as a pastoral theologian has been to look at the theme element as a text also. I'll discuss this in more detail below as part of sharing our own congregation's experience.

Worship "from the ground up" – theology, liturgy, hymnody

We started celebrating the Season of Creation in September, 2006 and have celebrated it every year since, a total of 15 years while I was there, and last year the congregation continued. For the first several years, we wanted to do more than four weeks each year and so we added two weeks, which gave us the opportunity to explore some areas on our own. Some of the themes we chose were **Slide 12:**

Four Compass Points
Grasses
Wetlands
Symbiotic Relationships
Generations
Chaos
Prairie
Soil
Trees
Desert
Sun and Moon

These, along with the original themes, have given us so much to explore in worship! As I said above, one of the most exciting aspects of the Season of Creation for me as a preacher and theologian has been to explore these natural elements as additional "texts" or sources of revelation. For me, this has been at the heart of the Season of Creation experience. My mother was a potter for 52 years, and she made me a communion set when I was ordained. As I use this set in worship, I see the marks of her hands, the grooves that her fingers left on the chalices, pitcher, and plate she fashioned. **Slide 13** So too, in the Season of Creation we are looking for the marks of God on creation: learning about the Creator from the things God has made.

Slide 14 There is, of course, Biblical warrant for using these natural elements as additional texts. Psalm 19 tells us that the created world reveals God to us:

Heaven is declaring God's glory;
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
One day gushes the news to the next,
and one night informs another what needs to be known.
Of course, there's no speech, no words—
their voices can't be heard—

but their sound extends throughout the world;
their words reach the ends of the earth. [Psalm 19:1-4, CEB]

Slide 15 Paul writes in to the church in Rome: “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse.” [Romans 1:20 CEB]

Understanding nature itself as a source of revelation, a holy text, has given me some exciting opportunities to do theology and liturgy literally from the ground up.

In our first year of celebrating the Season of Creation, I began to take seriously the idea that the created world itself could teach me about God. I found then, and continued to find through my 15 years of celebrating the Season of Creation that it profoundly impacted me as a theologian. A small example is in the sermon on trees from 2006 : **Slide 16**

A couple of weeks ago, before I began work on this sermon, I contacted ... Eric Singsaas, ...professor in the University’s Biology Department, is an expert on tree physiology. And he shared an insight that has proven very important to me. Eric said, “As far as I am concerned, the #1 cool thing about trees is that they are literally made from air. Invisible CO₂ enters the leaves, is made into sugars, and woven into cellulose (another type of sugar). Invisible “air” turns into something as massive as a white pine or redwood tree. They are useful for food and shelter for us as well as lots of other creatures.”

This is amazing to me. And it is really helping me understand the importance of biology in understanding theology. Trees are made of air. Trees take in the air and God transforms them in this process – bringing into being what didn’t exist before: sugars, cellulose, leaves. God makes them out of something else into what they are supposed to be. And coolest of all – relationships are fundamental to creation, because as Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote in our Call to Worship today: “we breathe out what the trees breathe in, we breathe in what the trees breathe out. Together we breathe each other into life.” ...we begin to learn from trees that transformation is integral to the way God’s world works. And we begin to learn that the miraculous is part of the ordinary in God’s world. So perhaps God really can change human hearts.

[“Out of Thin Air” Sermon on Tree Sunday, September 17, 2006, The Rev. Susan Gilbert Zencka]

Our Call to worship that day came from writings of Rabbi Arthur Waskow **Slide 17**

In our second year of celebrating the Season of Creation, we celebrated “Wetlands Sunday” **Slide 18** and I considered how these special landforms which used to be considered useless have proven to be essential to the health of Earth. I thought about how God’s creation includes wisdom that we do not always appreciate, that things we might considered useless or insignificant might be essential to the web of relationships in God’s Creation. So the prayer of confession reflected that:

Great God, Creator of all and Lover of the earth – we have failed to value the breadth of your creation. We have valued what and who seemed useful to us, and viewed as disposable other parts of your creation. We have assumed that what we could take, we should take. We have seen the earth as ours, never really believing that it, and we, are yours. We call you God, but we act as if we ourselves are the gods of our own little worlds. Forgive us, and help us to yearn for the largeness of your love, the openness of your world, the possibilities of your kingdom. Amen.
[Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church, September 30, 2007]

In 2009, we celebrated Chaos Sunday, and used jazz music throughout the service. And so, in the Call to Worship, we experimented with a little less order **Slide 19**

CALL TO WORSHIP [Each line, both parts, at the same time]

Leader: In the beginning

People: God

Leader: When God began creating

Men: It was formless

Women: It was empty

Men: It was void

Women: It was dark

Men: Waste

Women: Wild

Men: Unightly

Women: Confused

Leader: In the beginning

People: God

Leader: When God began creating

People: It was chaos.

Leader: As we begin,

All: God, begin in us.

Early on, I mentioned Katherine Hayhoe's recent book, *Saving Us*, and her advice that the best way to reach people about the urgency of climate change is through shared values, shared interests, and shared experiences. Everyone has some experience of creation, and many members will be able to share their photos or artistic insights in a way that will help the Season of Creation be a shared worship experience. **Slide 20**

Light and color – bringing Earth into the sanctuary **Slide 21**

From the first year, we tried to create connections to the outdoors during the Season of Creation. We eventually had some tradition built up around this, but we did change things up from time to time. The first year, I went off to the fabric store with the idea that I would create a river. I bought two lengths of fabric: a royal blue satin (for the base), and a shimmery blue/green sheer fabric to cover it, and I secured them into the baptismal font, which at Frame is integrated into the communion table. I draped the river down the front of the chancel diagonally, and down the steps, then turned it the other direction so that the "river" would flow into the nave, ending among the pews (on Communion Sundays we leave the river along the base of the steps). I bought a bunch of plants, brought in large stones, fabric trees, and created a nature scene.

Slide 22 Two years later, I found some beautiful banners made by Grace Cox-Johnson (one a tree, the other a mountain and river), and commissioned a pulpit cloth of the earth, sun, and moon, and these now are part of our Season of Creation.

In 2014 (I think) we experimented with a completely different setting for Soil Sunday, borrowing some antique garden tools, and bringing a bushel of soil into the chancel area **Slide 23**

In 2020, while we were worshipping entirely remotely, I preached twice during the Season of Creation from an outdoor location—on Forest Sunday, when I preached about mushrooms (yes, I really did), I did so while walking through the woods, looking for mushrooms (and finding some!); on River Sunday, I preached while walking alongside the Wisconsin River, and the particular topic of the sermon was Watershed Discipleship.

The congregation I served has grown to love the Season of Creation and looks forward to it each year. They continued celebrating it in 2022, after I had left. And I love it too. It has empowered me as a theologian, preacher, worship planner, but most of all, as a child of God in this amazing world God has entrusted to our care.

Other resources for the Season of Creation **Slide 24**

Resources for the Season of Creation

Dr. David Rhoads, emeritus professor from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, has been one of the leaders in promoting and interpreting the Season of Creation in the United States. He has developed two websites, each full of resources for the Season of Creation.

- webofcreation.org has many resources for liturgy.
- website letallcreationpraise.org which is devoted to providing worship resources for the Season of Creation. This website also includes many hymns.

Norman C. Habel, David Rhoads, H. Paul Santmire, co-editors, *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011). Biblical commentary for each Sunday of all three years in the Season of Creation. History of Season of Creation.

Norman Habel has written many resources himself, including many hymns, many of which are available on the <http://www.letallcreationpraise.org> website.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette creation care hymns at https://www.carolynshymns.com/topical_index.html

And the original seasonofcreation.com website has suggestions, commentary, and liturgies.