

Reconciling with Creation: Calling Us Back to Community with Creation/Creator

WENDY JANZEN¹

Genesis 9:9–17; Colossians 1:15–23

Last spring I spent some time wandering on a piece of land not far from our home in Kitchener. It used to be a little forest along the Spurline Trail that we would pass when walking to school or biking uptown. Though we are fortunate to have pockets of naturalized urban forests here in Waterloo Region, the pockets that are not within city parks are quickly disappearing. We discovered this firsthand when we returned from a vacation a few years ago and found that the trees were all gone in “our” little forest. Someone, presumably a developer, had torn them all down. In the years following, the land has sat vacant, looking empty, battered, and scarred. But that morning last spring, it was a sea of pale-blue forget-me-nots, sprinkled with pinks and yellows and whites of other “weeds” that had taken root, bringing beautiful signs of new life to the broken earth.

God calls all life into being. God’s presence is all around us—every atom is full of God’s energy. Romans 8 tells us that all of creation groans with the anticipation of redemption in God—every created thing *in unison*, both people *and* the natural world. We are God’s creation, created in the very image of God, part of the community of creation that God brought into being with word and breath as described in the two creation accounts in Genesis. But our relationship with creation is broken. We are no longer living in unison with creation. In fact, we have fashioned a society that idealizes civilization and de-values wilderness. We have forgotten our place in creation and our need to be in relationship with it.

I’ve been wondering what it looks like to have a relationship with creation. It seems that in our modern, urbanized world, our lives have become largely removed from nature. We live indoors, we work indoors, we worship indoors,

¹ Wendy lives in the Grand River watershed of southern Ontario together with her husband, Chip, and their two sons. She is a pastor at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, leads Burning Bush Forest Church (a monthly outdoor worshipping community), and is a partner in the Wild Church Network.

we study and learn indoors, we often exercise or walk indoors, we shop indoors, we travel in air-conditioned cars, we have domesticated and tamed our yards and our animals. Is nature something we are in mutual relationship with, or is it something we have controlled and commodified? In the process of domesticating the wilderness, have we also ended up domesticating our souls?

Perhaps you are thinking, “What is wrong with domestication? This is called progress. It is what civilization is based on. It is good that we are able to domesticate nature.” Well, yes, to an extent. I’m not advocating for a regressive “back-to-the-land” way of life here. But I *am* encouraging us to consider the cost of taming the wilderness and taming our souls. Our earth needs wild places and wild creatures. It benefits from biodiversity. That is why it is important for us to protect wild spaces and wild species. I believe our souls also need some wildness in them—some space at the center of our being that remembers we are not in control, that we are created beings, part of the created order, and are not God. I suspect that understanding ourselves to have a piece of wild, unrestrained faith helps us to connect with our Creator who created the wild beauty of our world.

Last winter I took an online short course through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary called “Biblical Foundations for Creation Care.” One of our textbooks had the subtitle *Rediscovering the Community of Creation*.² The author, Richard Bauckham, merged the ideas of *ecology*—the interconnectedness of all things, living and inanimate, on the planet—and *biblical theology*, which likewise evidences a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all creatures and relates this to their common dependence on God our Creator.

Through this course, I was reminded that the Bible as a whole offers a vision of creation that highlights our commonality with other creatures—our dependence on them as well as our significance for them. While we humans are created in the image of God, we are still part of a community of creatures, with reciprocal relationships and interdependence. All of creation benefits from the well-being of each specific species and ecosystem. All creatures are created to both glorify God and receive redemption in Christ.

Yes, that’s right: the more-than-human world is also in relationship with Christ. It is indeed the whole world, the whole cosmos, that is made a new creation in Christ. Jesus’s redeeming work offers a new future for the whole of creation, not just for humanity. If this important understanding is true—if all of creation, not just humanity, is in relationship with Christ—we have some reconciliation work to do with creation. For too long we have carried on as if we were all that mattered to God and that as stewards we could place ourselves

² Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010).



"Prayers from Orbit." COLLAGE: MATT VEITH / IMAGES: PIXABAY/FREEIMAGES.COM - CC 3.0

above the rest of the created order. We have treated the rest of nature as if it didn't really matter, and for that we need to repent and seek reconciliation.

Let me read some excerpts from what is called the Colossian hymn (Col 1:15–20, excerpts, *The Voice*):

He [Christ] is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation, the eternal. It was by Him that everything was created: the heavens, the earth, all things within and upon them, all things seen and unseen . . . He bled peace into the world by His death on the cross as *God's means of reconciling to Himself the whole creation—all things in heaven and all things on earth* (emphasis added).

Describing our relationship with the earth as simply stewardship or creation care does not do justice to the fuller biblical picture. Yes, God created humans with a unique place in the natural order, but God does not exclude the rest of creation from covenant or salvation. We need to begin to understand the biblical sense in which humans are fellow creatures within creation. Just as the Colossian hymn draws the whole creation into reconciliation with God through Christ, Genesis 9 reminds us that God is in covenant relationship not only with us but also with every living creature and with the land itself. We are all partners in God's covenant. These two biblical accounts of God/Christ reaching out in covenant and reconciliation with the more-than-human creation highlight for me the value of re-establishing our connection with creation and seeing ourselves as part of God's wonderfully diverse creation—not separate from it or above it, but in covenant with it through God.

This is where the brokenness of our relationship with the earth and our need for reconciliation come to play. We, as a society at large and many of us as individuals, have forgotten or neglected this relationship. Through our 24/7 lifestyles, many of us have distanced ourselves from the natural rhythms of day and night. Our grocery store offerings deny the seasonal rhythms of local food production. Our increasingly indoor, urbanized lives have limited the possibilities for significant connection with wild spaces and wildlife. When we avert our eyes to the degradation of the earth or throw up our hands in despair in the face of climate change, we do not honor the earth or the fact that our futures are interdependent.

Reconciliation is about restoring good relationships between two parties. Reconciliation can be tricky at the best of times. When something is broken, it is not always clear how to bring it back to wholeness. When the relationship in question is something as complicated as the human relationship with creation, what might reconciliation look like?

One way to approach the question is to ask ourselves additional questions to first help clarify where we have wronged creation and how we can possibly work toward reconciliation with creation. Here are a few to begin with:

- What actions have we taken that contribute to the harm of the land or its creatures? Can we admit how we may have wronged creation?
- Once we have identified an area where we have caused harm, can we ask for forgiveness? What would it look and feel like if we actually asked the land, or the trees, or the local creek, or the eagle for forgiveness? How do you think God would feel if we did this?
- Is it possible to make restitution? What would that look like? What changes can we make to patterns or habits or choices that negatively affect creation? What steps can we take to restore a healthy relationship with creation?
- What is God's desire for creation? What is God's desire for us? Can we exist in a harmonious, restored relationship that honors God's desire for all?

I would like to reiterate that one of the key things I believe God is calling us to is to remember our place in creation. We are not demi-gods with the power to create. We are people of the earth—*adam*—humans who ultimately belong to the wilds of creation and Creator. We are creatures, created by God to be in relationship with the created order, caring and listening and tending and asking for forgiveness when we cause brokenness. We cannot love or be in relationship with that which we do not know.

Last May I traveled to Colorado to attend a retreat led by Seminary of the Wild. It was a wild and wonderful experience, deepening my relationship with both Creator and creation. We spent most of our time outdoors in the mountains until a late-spring snowstorm forced us indoors! However, through practices and invitations to engage our souls while engaging in wilderness, I experienced a profound sense of God's love and a fuller awareness of my interconnectedness with creation.

We learned practices that had us interacting with nature in such a way that we opened ourselves to allowing nature to mirror an inner truth to us. An example of this is the "wild beauty walk," a practice that I then led the teenage girls in from our church youth group upon my return. Taking them to a local park with a forested area, I invited them to wander through the park individually, each paying attention for something of wild beauty. Once that something caught their attention—a flower, plant, tree, or animal—they spent time admiring its beauty and allowing it to mirror both their natural beauty and the nature of God back to them.

On this walk, it was a dandelion-seed head that caught my attention. Many of you may not find dandelions beautiful! But it captured my attention as it held its seed head up above the grass and caught the sun. Tall and wild and free, it stood in praise to God by exhibiting its full dandelion-ness. It held its feathery

seeds lightly, ready to let the breeze catch them and carry them off with the promise of new life. Each of the girls in the youth group also found something of beauty that spoke to them and offered them insight into how God created beauty in them as individuals.

Like the dandelion, which is not domesticated, our God who created these abundant flowers is a wild and creative God. Try as we might to control dandelions, they spread with wild abandon. I've been reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* with my two sons for the first time. Aslan, the Christ-figure lion, is beautiful and compassionate and full of love but not tame. Aslan is also mysterious, wonderful, wild, and beyond human understanding. Our encounters with the wild otherness of nature can be a way of encountering the greater otherness of God.

As we deepen our relationship with creation, our eyes are opened to the nature of our Creator. We regain a childlike wonder for nature and a respect and love for our fellow creatures. We are reminded of the sacredness of all of creation. We begin to see that due to our interconnectedness, what we do to creation we do to ourselves; the whole community of creation suffers when one part suffers. We recognize the places of brokenness in creation and our need to work toward a restored relationship—toward a way of living more lightly on the earth and with more respect for the whole of creation and its well-being. We see where we may need to change our ways—our heavy dependence on fossil fuels, our consumption habits, our destruction of wildlife habitats for further development—so that nature may continue to even exist.

I leave you with an invitation. Sometime this week, take some time to go to a natural area near you. As you are walking or sitting in creation, watch for a place, plant, tree, flower, or animal that draws your attention. Sit with it, and contemplate some of these questions:

- What drew you to it?
- What unique or wild beauty does it exhibit?
- What does it mean to be in covenant relationship with it?
- Does it give you any insights into the nature of God, our Creator?
- Are you able to offer words of gratitude or reconciliation?

May we continue to be agents of reconciliation in our world, with our neighbors and with all of creation. Thanks be to God for this holy calling!