

One

Introducing the Season of Creation



A Special Season of the Church Year

The Season of Creation is an optional season for the church year. For the most part, the seasons of the church year follow the life of Jesus: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. The remainder of the church year encompasses Pentecost season (or Ordinary Time), which celebrates life in the Holy Spirit. Of course, there are many special days and occasional services throughout the calendar of the church year, such as Christ the King Sunday and Rogation Day. God is celebrated throughout the entire church year. And God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer of creation, and the Holy Spirit as Sustainer of life are integral to worship throughout the church year. We hope that caring for creation is a vital dimension of every worship service.

There is no focus in the church year on God the Creator, however, no opportunity to reflect in a concentrated way on the foundation of redemption and sanctification, namely, the very creation itself that is redeemed and sanctified. For centuries, our theology, our ethics, and our worship have been oriented in two dimensions: our relationship with God and our human relationships with one another. Now it is time to turn our attention to God's relationship with all creation and with our relationship with creation (and with God through creation). The experience of a Season of Creation through four Sundays in the church year alone will not bring the transformation in consciousness we need to address the ecological problems we face today in God's creation. Yet unless we can see what

worship can be like in a season devoted fully to Creator and creation, we will probably not adequately incorporate care for creation into worship throughout the rest of the year. A Season of Creation has proven to be valuable in its own right. Yet we also need the Season of Creation to wake us up and show us another way to do worship *all the time*.

For four Sundays in the church year, you can join in a wholehearted experience of celebrating the mysteries and wonders of creation with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In a special way, the Season of Creation follows the lead of the psalmists who exhort us to celebrate together *with* creation—with the forest, the rivers, and the fields who praise the Creator in their own way. We celebrate Earth, the garden planet God has chosen as God’s sanctuary and as our home. We celebrate with the creatures God has created as our kin on this blue-green planet. As we celebrate, we are conscious of the crisis that creation faces because of human greed, exploitation, and neglect. As we celebrate, we empathize with those parts of creation—human and nonhuman—that are groaning because of human crimes against creation. And, especially, we celebrate the Christ, whose death brings forgiveness for our sins against creation and whose risen presence is the cosmic power at work in reconciling and restoring creation.

The Season of Creation is a relatively new season of the church year, a season that is also known in the church bodies of some countries as “Creation Time.” As an optional season, the Season of Creation can be celebrated at different points in the church year. Most commonly it has been celebrated between Creation Day on September 1 and St. Francis of Assisi Day on October 4. In this scenario, the four Sundays in September are the core Sundays of the Season of Creation. Nevertheless, the Season of Creation can be celebrated appropriately in the Easter Season or at other times in the Pentecost Season. Some congregations have spread the celebration of the four Sundays throughout the church year.

The Season of Creation is not simply a harvest thanksgiving festival writ large nor a four-week affirmation of the wonders of creation, though these themes do indeed play a role. Nor is the Season of Creation primarily designed to redress the relative lack of emphasis contemporary Christians have placed on the first article of the Apostles’ Creed in their worship, though surely this deficiency needs to be overcome. Moreover, the Season of Creation is not introduced first and foremost as an ecclesiastical program to encourage Christian engagement in the current environmental movement, though this may indeed be a significant outcome of participation in this Creation Season.

In response to the ecological crisis, many congregations throughout the world quite appropriately celebrate a secular occasion such as Earth Day or World Environment Day with Christian worship. We applaud these occasions for worship. At the same time, the Season of Creation goes further. It brings the celebration of Earth fully into the orbit of Christian worship as a natural and integral part of the church year. And it extends over a period of four Sundays as a means to enable a much richer and deeper expression of worship.

Fundamentally, the Season of Creation recognizes that our relationship with the rest of nature is a religious and spiritual matter that views life as “creation.” The Season of Creation challenges us to reorient our relationship with creation, with the Creator, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit. While this challenge may have been provoked, in part, by the current ecological crisis and a growing awareness of our place in the web of life, the origins of our reorientation lie deep in our Christian tradition, both in our biblical roots and in our theological heritage. We are challenged to return to our biblical and theological traditions to rediscover our intimate connections with creation and with Christ and the Holy Spirit in creation. We return to see ourselves again as part of the very Earth from which we are made.

The Season of Creation is part of the heritage of mainstream Christian worship. There is no break from the gospel at the core of our faith. Christ is at the heart of our celebrations. The incarnate Christ connects us with Earth. The cosmic Christ is the new life at the core of creation. In the Season of Creation we celebrate Christ together with creation, we face the ecological crisis with Christ, and we serve Christ in the healing of creation.

Why a Season of Creation?

There are many reasons! Here are seven of them:

First, *because God is first and foremost the Creator of all of life.* To fail to focus adequately on this dimension of God’s reality in worship is to fail to appreciate the fullness God’s work, and it is to narrow and diminish our relationship with God. Our own fullness of life depends upon our relationship with God as Creator.

Second, *because we were created with the rest of nature.* We came from Earth and we cannot survive without all that Earth provides. Just as Earth has creative powers, so Earth itself has restorative powers. Unless we have centered opportunities to express awareness of and gratitude for our

dependence upon Earth and our relationship with other creatures, we will not be whole as human beings.

Third, *because God has given us a creation to celebrate with!* In recent years, much of humanity has viewed creation as a resource to be exploited rather than a mystery to be celebrated and sustained. The time has come not only to celebrate creation but to transform our human relationship to creation by worshiping in solidarity with creation

Fourth, *because through worship we have an opportunity to come to terms with the current ecological crises in a spiritual way so as to empathize with a groaning creation.* Worship provides a viable and meaningful way not only to include creation's praise of God but also to engender a deep relationship with the suffering of a groaning creation.

Fifth, *because a fresh focus on the wonders and wounds of creation will help us in positive ways to love creation and so care for creation as our personal vocation and our congregational ministry.* Worshiping with this new awareness may well provide the impetus for a new mission for the church, a mission to creation.

Sixth, *because this season enables us to celebrate the many ways in which Christ is connected with creation.* From the mystery of the incarnation to the mystery of a cosmic Christ who reconciles all things in heaven and Earth, we celebrate the connection of Christ with creation. And we seek to identify with Earth in solidarity with Christ.

Seventh, *because this season enables us to deepen our understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit in relationship with creation.* As the "Giver of life" and the "Sustainer of life," the Holy Spirit is the source of our empowerment, inspiration, and guidance as we seek to live in a way sustainable for all God's creation. Being "in the unity of the Holy Spirit" encompasses our relationship with all of life. This is foundational for our worship.

Church leaders have called for a richer spiritual connection with creation. Many Christians are searching for ways to promote a ministry to care for Earth. Our precious planet is at risk. Because worship is so central to the Christian life, it behooves us to provide foundational experiences in worship to foster a deep transformation in our relationship with the rest of creation. By concentrating our worship on God's creation and our relationship with Christ in creation, we can seek ways to heal rather than exploit creation, to care for our planet home rather than destroy it. And, as we learn what it means to celebrate God the Creator and to worship with creation in a Season of Creation, we may

also come to worship God as Creator more meaningfully throughout the entire church year.

Origins and Growth

In a sense, the origins of the Season of Creation can be traced back to the very beginnings of creation. On the seventh day, according to the Genesis 1 account, God celebrated the completion of creation by resting and by blessing that day. The blessing of God, therefore, was not confined to creation as such, but also included a specific time for affirming and restoring creation. The psalmist calls on God to continue that celebration so that God can “rejoice in all his works” (Ps. 104:31). Surely, we can rejoice with God!

The Season of Creation that serves as a basis for this book originated in Australia and has been adapted for use in North America. At the same time, there are many different expressions of a Season of Creation or Creation Time in the church year celebrated in different denominations and diverse countries. Today, the celebration of a Season of Creation is truly a worldwide movement with origins in several simultaneous movements.

In 1999, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I of Constantinople declared September 1 to be Creation Day, a time to offer “prayers and supplications to the Maker of all, both as thanksgiving for the great gift of creation and as a petition for its protection and salvation.”¹

In Europe, the European Christian Environmental Network chose the four Sundays of September as an appropriate time to celebrate creation and to come to terms with the current environmental crisis. They designated September as Creation Time, a season recently endorsed by the Third European Ecumenical Assembly and celebrated, for example, by the Bishop of London at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

This season has also been widely promoted in the Philippines and endorsed by their Catholic Bishops Conference. In their Calendar Statement of 2003, they wrote: “During this special period of ‘Creation Time’ we urge that ‘our different liturgies celebrate the beauty and pain of our world, our connectedness to the natural world and the ongoing struggle for social justice.’”²

In the Episcopal Church in the United States, the Season of Creation was inaugurated in the mid-1990s at the Church of the Redeemer in Morristown, New Jersey. The season has been widely adapted and celebrated among Episcopal congregations. In 2005, the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota called for its congregations to observe a Creation Season

of four to eight weeks during Pentecost. The Episcopal Church provides many resources for celebrating this season.

Without any knowledge of developments in other countries, the spontaneous movement upon which our work is based arose in Australia, initiated primarily by Norman C. Habel. In 2000, St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Adelaide, South Australia, celebrated the first Season of Creation in Australia. For four weeks, adults and children relived the great creation stories in the Bible. The members confessed what humanity has done to creation and how God is working to renew creation.

From 2001 to 2003, Habel worked with the Uniting Church Commission for Mission in Melbourne, Victoria. After a series of workshops, their leaders agreed to explore the idea of a specific Season of Creation. In 2003 and 2004, the Uniting Church in Melbourne provided the funds to develop the resources needed to celebrate the Season of Creation. In 2005, after being tested in about fifty congregations in Melbourne and Adelaide, the Season of Creation was announced as an optional season for congregations across Australia.

In the United States, David Rhoads began to adapt and promote the Australian Season of Creation for use in the United States through the Green Congregation Program and the Web of Creation Web site (see below, p. 14). Since that time, congregations of various denominations in the United States have incorporated the Season of Creation in creative ways with new hymns, anthems, and liturgies.

Since 2005, the Season of Creation has been celebrated by congregations of various denominations in other countries as well. For example, in a 2008 newsletter of the Network of Earthkeeping Christian Communities of South Africa (NECCSA), the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, wrote, “In adopting ‘The Season of Creation’ we are affirming that we are choosing the option of flourishing humanity with flourishing creation. . . . My prayer is that this may enhance our worship of God, deepen our comprehension of God as Creator, and broaden our understanding of what it means to be stewards of creation.”³

In 2009, the United Church of Canada passed a resolution urging churches to celebrate Creation Time during five Sundays in the Pentecost season. The Sundays are organized around the theme “What Is Creation Saying to Us?” The weekly celebrations focus on such messages as “Share My Abundance,” “Delight in Me,” and “Walk Lightly on Me.” The United Church provides extensive liturgical resources. In addition, they have chosen the color orange and designed a stole for the celebration of Creation Time.

The movement for a Season of Creation or Creation Time will continue to spread as more and more denominations and congregations recognize the importance of worshipping our Creator together with creation in this time when we are so acutely aware of the problems and possibilities of our human relationship with the rest of nature.

Features of the Season of Creation

THE LITURGIES

Historically, the various seasons of the church year evolved over time in the early church, as did the basic structure of the eucharistic liturgy itself. The Season of Creation also evolved as an ecumenical form of worship. The team involved in the production of the basic liturgy, readings, and resources for the Season of Creation (on the Web site and in this volume) reflect a process to which a range of traditional denominations have contributed.

The underlying structure of the Season of Creation liturgy found in these resources is basically the same as that found in most churches. The distinctive feature of this liturgy, however, is the fact that a biblical theology of creation informs the several major components of the Season of Creation liturgy and worship resources. As a result, there is a coherent theological progression that informs the sequence of worship. The Season of Creation is not intended to be simply a traditional liturgy with creation motifs included at appropriate points, but a worship sequence that involves creation in a specific progression based on biblical theology. This new theology of “worshipping with creation” is developed in the next chapter.

THE DOMAINS

Traditionally, the names and focuses of the various Sundays of any given season center on specific themes and significant times in the life of Christ. We remember Sundays called Transfiguration or Septuagesima. We celebrate Sundays such as Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Other days such as Epiphany and Good Friday are associated with other days of the week. In the Season of Creation, we seek to connect the Sundays of the season with specific domains of God’s work of creation. Thus, for example, we celebrate Forest Sunday, Ocean Sunday, and Earth Sunday.

The final Sunday in the three-year cycle is, appropriately, Cosmos or Universe Sunday.

By connecting the Sundays to domains of creation, we hope to achieve four things: (a) to engender an awareness that we are worshipping *with* this domain of creation on a given Sunday; (b) to make a connection with these particular domains in the biblical readings for the day; (c) to foster a realization that each of these domains requires healing because of our environmental sins against creation; and (d) to provide an opportunity for God to bring about reconciliation with this domain of creation.

By highlighting these very concrete dimensions of the domains of creation, visual and tactile experiences can also be readily represented in our worship experience. These can be achieved not only through the language of the liturgy but also through incorporating relevant images and expressions of nature inside the worship space of the church. In this way, members of a congregation can use their artistic abilities and imaginations to turn the sanctuary into the vibrant part of the domain of creation being celebrated.

FLEXIBILITY OF USE

While there is an established structure and progression in the liturgy, different congregations and diverse denominations will modify the language to fit their traditions, depending on whether they are more formal or more free-flowing than the pattern provided by the Season of Creation liturgies found on the Web site. The liturgies were developed originally by a team that included a variety of denominations. Two versions, one more formal than the other, are located on the Web site. The liturgies may be downloaded free from the site and adapted to meet the needs and commitments of the congregation. This season also provides an opportunity for congregations and church groups to create new liturgies, hymns, anthems, confessions, prayers, and blessings.

The language of liturgy varies from country to country. For example, regional flora and fauna will vary. What was originally Outback Sunday in Australia is obviously more appropriately named Wilderness Sunday in most parts of the world. In the invitation to worship, Australians may invite kangaroos and cockatoos to praise the Creator, whereas in Alaska an invitation to polar bears and seal pups may be more appropriate. Locally, some congregations have also chosen to vary the titles of the Sundays to take into account specific issues or needs. In the face of global warming, for example, some congregations have chosen Solar Sunday as the specific

designation of Sky Sunday and worshiped with these contemporary issues in mind. The readings for a given Sunday are chosen to suit the original designation of a Sunday within a sequence of Sundays, a factor that should be taken into account in modifying the domain names of the Sundays. And, as mentioned above, the whole Season of Creation is in some places referred to as “Creation Time,” which may be organized around Christian commitments and practices more than domains of creation.

READING THE BIBLE

The Season of Creation has incorporated a sequence of readings appropriate to the domain name used for each Sunday. Just as we seek to worship with creation and our kin in creation, so, too, we are interested in how we should read, study, and preach from the readings in this context. Accordingly, we are seeking to read the relevant Bible texts also from the perspective of Earth and of members of the Earth community. We have become aware that in the past most interpretations of texts about creation—Earth or our kin on this planet—have been read from an anthropocentric perspective, focusing on the interests of humans. The task before us is to begin reading also from the perspective of creation.

In chapter 3, this approach to reading the Bible is outlined in detail, with principles and examples for interpreting the Bible. Furthermore, the commentators on the lessons for the Season of Creation, featured in the textual commentaries of this volume, take into account the anthropocentric dimensions of the text and its interpreters and then seek to read the text with empathy for Earth, identifying with the various domains and nonhuman characters in the reading. In so doing, we seek not only to worship with creation but to join with creation in the task of healing and sustaining our planet.

Readings for the Season of Creation

The Season of Creation is celebrated during four Sundays in each of the three years of the Revised Common Lectionary. The sequence of four readings for the Season of Creation creates a liturgical pattern similar to that in the season of Advent. The readings covering the three-year cycle correspond broadly to the years of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the Revised Common Lectionary. The sequence of readings in each series follows a

broad structure of creation, alienation, passion, and new creation. The readings also pay special attention to the story of Earth in the Scriptures, a story that completes the story of God and the story of humanity in the Scriptures.

YEAR 1—SERIES A: THE SPIRIT SERIES (YEAR OF MATTHEW)

This series concentrates on those texts where the Spirit is breathing life into creation, suffering with creation, and renewing all creation.

First Sunday in Creation: Forest Sunday

Old Testament	Genesis 2:4b-22
Psalm	Psalm 139:13-16
Epistle	Acts 17:22-28
Gospel	John 3:1-16

Second Sunday in Creation: Land Sunday

Old Testament	Genesis 3:14-19; 4:8-16
Psalm	Psalm 139:7-12
Epistle	Romans 5:12-17
Gospel	Matthew 12:38-40

Third Sunday in Creation: Outback/Wilderness Sunday

Old Testament	Joel 1:8-10, 17-20
Psalm	Psalm 18:6-19
Epistle	Romans 8:18-27
Gospel	Matthew 3:13—4:2 or Mark 1:9-13

Fourth Sunday in Creation: River Sunday

Old Testament	Genesis 8:20-22; 9:12-17
Psalm	Psalm 104:27-33
Epistle	Revelation 22:1-5
Gospel	Matthew 28:1-10

YEAR 2—SERIES B: THE WORD SERIES (YEAR OF MARK)

The second series focuses on those texts where the Word is the impulse that summons forth creation, evokes praise from creation, and stirs life in creation.

First Sunday in Creation: Earth Sunday

Old Testament	Genesis 1:1-25
Psalm	Psalm 33:1-9
Epistle	Romans 1:18-23
Gospel	John 1:1-14

Second Sunday in Creation: Humanity Sunday

Old Testament	Genesis 1:26-28
Psalm	Psalm 8
Epistle	Philippians 2:1-8
Gospel	Mark 10:41-45

Third Sunday in Creation: Sky Sunday

Old Testament	Jeremiah 4:23-28
Psalm	Psalm 19:1-6
Epistle	Philippians 2:14-18
Gospel	Mark 15:33-39

Fourth Sunday in Creation: Mountain Sunday

Old Testament	Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm	Psalm 48:1-11
Epistle	Romans 8:28-39
Gospel	Mark 16:14-18

YEAR 3—SERIES C: THE WISDOM SERIES (YEAR OF LUKE)

The third series includes those texts where Wisdom is the designing force behind creation and the impulse that enables the parts of creation to fulfill their roles.

First Sunday in Creation: Ocean Sunday

Old Testament	Job 38:1-18
Psalm	Psalm 104:1-9, 24-26
Epistle	Ephesians 1:3-10
Gospel	Luke 5:1-11

Second Sunday in Creation: Fauna Sunday

Old Testament	Job 39:1-8, 26-30
Psalm	Psalm 104:14-23

Theology, Liturgy, Bible

Epistle	1 Corinthians 1:10-19
Gospel	Luke 12:22-31

Third Sunday in Creation: Storm Sunday

Old Testament	Job 28:20-27
Psalms	Psalms 29
Epistle	1 Corinthians 1:20-31
Gospel	Luke 8:22-25

Fourth Sunday in Creation: Cosmos Sunday

Old Testament	Proverbs 8:22-31
Psalms	Psalms 148
Epistle	Colossians 1:15-20
Gospel	John 6:41-51

The Season of Creation Web Site and Logo

The Season of Creation Web site (<http://www.seasonofcreation.com>) includes, among other things, a set of liturgies for each of the Sundays in the three-year cycle, visuals that may be used during worship on these Sundays, sermon themes, brief Bible studies on the readings for a given Sunday, and suggestions for Earth care that congregations may wish to consider as part of their mission. In addition, news and documents relating to the expansion of the Season of Creation around the world are also included. This volume is designed to supplement and interpret the resources found on the Web site and to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the biblical readings for preaching and for Bible study in general.

The Season of Creation has a logo that is displayed on the back cover of this volume. The orb of the logo is planet Earth filled with the waves of God's Spirit. The veins of the leaf suggest the web of creation. The leaf forms a tree of life that is also the cross of Christ. Leaves from the tree of life are for healing the nations (Rev. 22:2).

NOTES

1. “Message of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I on the day of the protection of the Environment (1st September 1989),” <http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&id=464&tla=en>, accessed March 7, 2011.

2. “Celebrating Creation Day and Creation Time,” A Pastoral Statement of the CBCP Permanent Council, September 1, 2003, <http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/2000s/html/2003-creation.html>, accessed March 7, 2011.

3. This statement is not currently available at the NECCSA Web site, but see their 2007 statement, “A South African Season of Creation, “ at <http://www.neccsa.org.za/Season%20of%20creation.htm>, accessed March 7, 2011.