

First United Methodist Church  
 Madison, WI  
 March 19, 2017

### **Cosmic Christ, Earthly Hope**

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Colossians 1:15-23).*

This past October, toward the end of the month, a call went out. A summons, from North Dakota: “I write...to invite you to join me on Standing Rock Sioux nation on the banks of the Missouri River on November 3rd...Our duty as people of faith...could not be clearer: We will gather to stand witness to the water protector's acts of compassion for God's creation, and to the transformative power of God's love to make a way out of no way.” When Father John Floberg, supervising priest of the Episcopal churches of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, sent out the call, he did not expect that, just 8 days later, over 500 clergy and laity would respond. Among the caravan of those who did were three vans packed with seminary students, camping gear, a pastor, and a professor from Evanston, IL. They arrived late afternoon on Nov. 2 to news of an action that had taken place earlier in the day: indigenous protectors who had built a floating bridge across the river to allow elders to pray on sacred lands had been met with tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. By dusk, the Evanston crew was setting up their tents at the main site, Oceti Sakowin, listening to the beating of drums and songs and prayers lifted up from

the sacred fire at the heart of the camp. Prayers for those who had been wounded and traumatized. Prayers for the police. Prayers for those financing the Dakota Access Pipeline. Well, the crew did not sleep well that first night. Massive flood lights, placed on surrounding hillsides by security forces, lit up the camp. Sniper vehicles sat atop the hills, and a low flying airplane passed over and around camp from dusk till dawn. It must have been around 5:00am and about 27 degrees. “Sun dancers, get up!” An elder was calling out over a loudspeaker from the sacred fire. “Pipe dancers, get up! The black snake is restocking its canisters and shipping in more rubber bullets. Today is a good day!” And then he called again: “Christians, wake up! Dust off your Bibles and get up! You are here for a reason. The black snake is getting close to the river. Today is a good day! Get up! Christians, get up and do something!”

The apostle Paul puts it this way: *all things* have been created through him. In him *all things* hold together. Gerard Manley Hopkins says it this way: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”<sup>i</sup> Here’s Charles Wesley: “Author of every work divine, Who dost thro’ both creations shine...Thou art the Universal Soul, The [supple] power that fills the whole.”<sup>ii</sup> Did you catch that? God *in* creation. The divine Christ...living, moving, pulsating in and through every creature, every cell, every flow of vibrating energy. All things. That’s kinda strange, right? I mean, it’s not what most Christians believe at least. Sure, we can imagine God *above* the creation, God *over* the creation. But not God *in* the creation. Theologian Joseph Sittler, who taught at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago for many years, used to say that most Christians think of Christ’s redemptive presence in the human soul. Some can imagine Christ at work in human history. But the breadth and depth of God’s saving presence affirmed in the scriptures, he said, is cosmic in scope. Jesus is the Cosmic Christ. It’s actually not that odd, when you think about it. Ask a representative gathering of

Christians, conservative to liberal, mainline progressive or evangelical; ask where they most experience the presence and power of God, and most will tell about some encounter with the divine in nature. Hiking through the Sierra Nevadas in the fall at sunset. Standing near a small creek in a North Carolina meadow covered with white lilies (T. Berry). Kneeling in the summer Wisconsin garden, with joyful hands digging in the soil. Pope Francis writes about it this way: God's "Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship...Nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus [a place] of [divine] presence."<sup>iii</sup> God *in* creation. In God's own life, all created things hold together.

So, here we are. Let's be honest. We are lost in the wilderness of an environmental Lent. We find ourselves straying further day by day, year by year, into a worsening season of environmental crucifixion. The marks are all there. Betrayal. The will of the people. Brutal imperial powers. The year was 1991. Shell Oil Company had done the scientific research. They knew. A video Shell produced and distributed for the next few years was clear: "Region by region analysis of world temperature records shows," a narrator says, "a small but significant warming trend over the century with a marked increase in the 1980s. What the computer modellers are looking at is the possibility of change at a rate faster than at any time since the end of the ice age. Change too fast perhaps for life to adapt, without severe dislocation."<sup>iv</sup> They knew. ExxonMobil Corporation's research was even more decisive. The investigative reporting on this is conclusive. The oil industry foresaw the biospheric devastations; they could have chosen to invest in a clean, renewable energy future. But they didn't. They doubled-down on fossil fuel excavation for the sake of maximizing short-term financial profits. Betrayed – for a giant bag of dirty coins. And here we are: we the people. The crowds keep voting time and

again not for the health of the planet but to cheer on climate science denialists, corporate criminality, and political duplicity. Slash the EPA. Drill baby, drill! Crucify, the crowd shouts. Crucify! And so they do: around the world, the killing of environmental activists is rising sharply. The year 2015 alone saw over 185 assassinations, and nearly 40% of the victims were from indigenous communities, precisely because goods like timber, minerals, and hydropower are still abundant on lands that have been left undisturbed by native cultures which respect and protect them.<sup>v</sup> Just this Tuesday, following a ruling by a U.S. District Judge, Dakota Access announced crews would be installing a pipe under Lake Oahe, in North Dakota, with oil expected to flow beneath the waters sometime “between Monday, March 20, and Wednesday, March 22.”<sup>vi</sup> So here we are. The marks are all there. Betrayal. The will of the people. Brutal imperial powers. Lost in the madness of an ecological lent.

Now listen, and believe: God’s love is stronger than death. Stronger than our sin. Now more than ever, be steadfast, ground yourself in the faith that the love of God in Jesus Christ is secure. For “where could I ever go,” the Psalmist affirms, “or where could I flee? Even if I were fallen,” he says “into the darkest regions of a godless abyss, down in a netherworld with the dead, still, even then, you are there...you lay your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:7-8, 5). There’s a 15<sup>th</sup> century altar painting in a church just outside of Siena, Italy. It belongs to a series of panels depicting episodes from the passion of Christ. This particular image reflects the conviction affirmed in the traditional expression of the Apostles Creed that after Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, he descended into hell. The altar painting shows Jesus reaching into the underworld tomb. He’s standing firm on top of the door he’s already knocked down, leaving the entrance now wide open. His arm is outstretched as he grabs onto entombed prisoners to pull

them out. If you look closely, you can see a red mark in the heart of Jesus' hand.<sup>vii</sup> The power that will save us is love. Look, I get it, cynicism about the state of the world is *so* tempting; but cynicism is not going to free us. Despair in the face of yet another day of bad news reconciles nothing. Not even righteous judgment and the condemnation of sinners, *ultimately*, will bring us peace. The dominion that reaches deeper and stretches wider than all other thrones is the perfect love of God. For God "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good" and "sends rain upon the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). So be rooted and grounded in *this*, and do not waver: God's love is stronger than our death.

Well, we've got work to do, don't we. It's time for the church to get active. And we know who to follow. Jesus is the firstborn, the head of this body, the beginning fruits of a new creation. That's our mission, our marching orders: get in line and follow Jesus into his resurrection future. Radical Pietist Christoph Blumhardt points the way forward: "It is not enough to celebrate Easter and say 'Christ is risen.' It is useless to proclaim this unless at the same time we can say that that we have also risen...The new life means that forces for life can now be seen within you, that something of God...something holy, can grow in you." He continues: "God's will is for the earth as much as it is for the heavens... And for this reason we can bring hope into everything, into our daily life, into everything at which we work and into anything that we touch...We are simply to ask Jesus to give us more and more of his resurrection...until the extraordinary powers from on high that are within our reach can get down to work on all that we do."<sup>viii</sup> So picture this: picture our churches raising up a new generation of earth-loving eco-disciples. Christian education moves outdoors – into woodlots, into parks, onto green urban rooftops – where our children and youth learn the stories of faith

while learning from scientists in the congregation about the plants and wildlife native to their local watersheds. Imagine church-supported community agriculture taking over parking lots each summer, with Saturday night music, folk dancing, and holy communion potluck meals building up a sense of neighborliness in our communities. How about this? Congregations are setting aside space in their buildings as part of the new cooperative economy. So you've got repair cafes, where members and residents are paired with retired mechanics for the guided do-it-yourself repair of small appliances, electrical items, and other household goods. And you've got child care and meal sharing coops for young parents run by the older members of the congregation and a bartering, local-currency station run by the youth group. Seriously, let's dream big. For real, as the kids say. Not only have all the major denominations – including the United Methodist Church – fully divested from the fossil fuel industry, they've reinvested those monies in a Land Regeneration Project that helps aging rural farmers transition their land to the young urban and suburban poor for land conservation, sustainable energy generation, and agro-ecological food production. Are you seeing this? Christians around the world, inspired by Pope Francis, are participating with indigenous communities, interfaith coalitions, and grassroots movements to create a new radically democratic politics and new earth-centered economics. Too much? Unrealistic? Nah. Jesus is risen. And we're going to follow his lead. He's the head of this body, the church, and he's leading us to a whole new creation.

So it's time to wake up. Christians, it's time to get up! Let's dust off our Bibles. We're here for a reason. Today's a good day. And we've got work to do.

Amen.

### Benediction:

Love all Creation  
 The whole of it and every grain of sand  
 Love every leaf  
 Every ray of God's light  
 Love the animals  
 Love the plants  
 Love everything

If you love everything  
 You will perceive  
 The divine mystery in things  
 And once you have perceived it  
 You will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly  
 More and more everyday  
 And you will at last come to love the whole world  
 With an abiding universal love.<sup>ix</sup>

So go now in peace, and in hope for creation:  
 In the name of God the Father who is our Mother,  
 Jesus our brother in suffering,  
 And the Holy Spirit who gives us life.  
 Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44395](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44395)

<sup>ii</sup> Charles Wesley, Hymn XXVIII, sts. 1,5.

<sup>iii</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, para. 88.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://thecorrespondent.com/6311/shell-took-a-good-long-look-at-climate-change-and-then-went-back-to-looking-for-oil/2244455904680-2a618a43>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/21/science/berta-caceres-environmental-activists-murders.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.agweek.com/news/4230373-highway-1806-remains-closed-oil-projected-flow-through-dakota-access-pipeline-next-week>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/231664>

<sup>viii</sup> Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, "Christ Rising," <http://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/easter-readings/christ-rising>.

<sup>ix</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Life Prayers From Around the World*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p. 26.