

Eco-Justice Commentary on the Common Lectionary for Year C (2015)
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The Second Sunday of Advent in Year C (December 6, 2015)

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

The setting of the *oikumene* found in the readings for the First Sunday of Advent prompted us to ask after the hope that the Christian gospel might offer a world caught up in the global ecological crisis of climate chaos: “What reason,” we wrote, do we who fear for the future of planet Earth have to “stand up and raise our heads” at the coming of our Lord and Savior (Luke 21:28) into our lives in the coming year of 2016? Very little, it would seem, on first reading of the scriptures appointed for the Second Sunday of Advent. The first lesson focuses on “the messenger” who “like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap” comes to the temple and sits as “a refiner and purifier of silver” to “purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (Malachi 3:2-3). With this burning image of purification, the text revisits the conflict we followed through year B between the prophetic forces of John the Baptist and Jesus over against the temple establishment. But the implied restoration of the temple in Jerusalem is already irrelevant for us, the temple having been displaced by Jesus, as reflected in the lessons of Year B; its restoration would mean the reversal of the reorientation to creation we found in Mark’s narrative of the life of Jesus. In Luke, Zechariah’s prophesy in the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79) identifies the baby John as that future messenger who prepares the way of one who will “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” a powerful creational image, to be sure, one promising a path that leads to peace, but without specific reference to the restoration of creation. The reading from Philippians 1 focuses narrowly on the fellowship of the community in Christ and the love that the Apostle Paul’s encourages them to have for each other as they wait the Lord’s coming.

The most disappointing, even appalling, text of all, however, is the Gospel for the day: while the voice of John the Baptist cries “prepare the way of the Lord” from the “region around the Jordan,” what he summons us to do sounds nothing at all like caring restoration of the creation. John’s voice is, Luke writes (in the translation of Luke Timothy Johnson),

“A voice of one crying out in the desert:
Prepare the Lord’s way, make straight his paths.
Every gully will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be leveled.
Crooked ways will be made straight, rough ways smooth.
All flesh will see the salvation that comes from God.” (Luke 3:3-5).

As Johnson comments on verse 4, “The image in this citation [from Isaiah 40:4] is of a road engineer, shouting out orders for the construction of the “royal road” of the Lord.” Indeed, Luke seems to make a point of emphasizing this flattened earth. He “shares the citation from Isa 40:3 with Matthew, Mark,

and John,” Johnson notes, “but he alone adds these lines from Isa 40:3-5” (*The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 64). So, no, on the surface at least, these readings for this Sunday offer little hope for any restoration of creation beyond that afforded members of the Christian community.

Concern for care of creation nevertheless prompts us to investigate more carefully what Luke meant with his citation of Isaiah 40. What was the point of this flattened earth? The text is embedded in Luke's strong interest in, and frequent quotation of, the book of Isaiah, of which this is the first instance we encounter in Year C. Interpreters of Luke have identified many reasons for this interest. Peter Mallen lists several, including the literary resources that appear to predict the nature of Jesus' ministry and passion, support for his argument for Jesus as the messiah of God, legitimation for “a mission to proclaim salvation to the nations while also explaining the rejection by many in Israel,” and the fact that Isaiah's rich, evocative language provides metaphors unencumbered by the references to Torah that occur commonly in the Mosaic tradition, which would “translate easily into a Gentile context” (Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts*. London: T & T Clark International, 2008, pp. 201-203). Luke, Mallon concludes, read Isaiah in its Septuagint form, “as revealing the plan and purposes of God,” often “from a christocentric perspective,” with “Isaiah's hope of salvation as applying to the church.” As such, he drew from Isaiah “models for perception and a paradigm for ongoing mission,” most significantly the model of the New Exodus and the servant motifs, the latter actually completely transforming the former in “a surprising and subversive fashion” that “ignores a key aspect of Jewish hope, namely the restoration and reglorification of Jerusalem” (Mallen, pp. 203-07).

In light of these considerations, there are at least three possibilities to consider in explanation for Luke's Isaianic flattened earth. First, was it perhaps simply a matter of greater fidelity than Mark and Matthew to the text of Isaiah? It seems not: we note that in the verse immediately following (v. 6), Luke leaves out Isaiah's reference to God's glory, in favor of a clear statement about the universal reach of the “salvation that comes from God” as something that “all flesh shall see,” a theme we have already in our comment on the readings for the First Sunday of Advent identified as significant for our concern with care of creation.

Secondly, mindful of the historical context of the Roman Empire, might not this emphasis on universal access to God's work of salvation have prompted the author to employ a rhetorical image that would resonate with his readers' experience of the Roman road system, by means of which the Roman empire was indeed integrating the inhabited world? (Cf. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians; The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven; Yale University Press, pp. 17-18). If the conception of Jesus was exalted by Luke as superior by virtue of its virginal spirituality to that not only of John the Baptist (Johnson argues this point, pp. 38-39), but also Caesar Augustus (Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan argue this in their *The First Christmas*, New York, Harper Collins, 2007, pp. 120-123), roads through the wilderness without hill or turn, it might be argued, could similarly demonstrate superior power in an implied imperial competition. This, of course, would not render Luke's point in employing the image any less obnoxious for current defenders of the environment!

There is a further possibility, however, one also having to do with imperial competition, but in this instance, religious. As Luke would have learned from Mark, the reason for going out to John at the

Jordan, away from Jerusalem, was to welcome the arrival of the Lord, not on Mt. Zion (as the oracle of Malachi of our first lesson this Sunday has it), but in the wilderness, away from the center of political and religious power. As we will very soon see in Jesus' baptism by John (Luke 3:21), in Luke as in Mark, God will be present where Jesus is. For his readers, Zion is no longer the sacred precinct where God is to be encountered, because the temple in Jerusalem, as all Luke's early readers would have known, has been destroyed. But if the mountain of Zion has been brought low, not only materially but, more importantly, in terms of its religious significance, must not the sacredness of all other mountains also be rendered nil and void? It is interesting to note in this connection that in Luke (as in both Matthew and Mark) Jesus forbids his disciples to erect a sanctuary on the mountain of transfiguration (9:28-35), thereby limiting its enduring significance as a sacred precinct; "faith to move mountains," furthermore, is commended by Jesus in all three gospels (Matthew 17:20, Mark 11:22-23, Luke 17:6); but Luke goes one step more when he also relocates the Matthean "Sermon on the Mount" to "a level place" (6:17). Isaiah's flattened earth thus puts his readers on notice: *all* the mountains will be brought low and *every* valley filled, so that "all flesh" can instead see "the salvation of God" in Jesus. The competition for acknowledgment of divine presence will be won, not only in relationship to Zion, with its religious establishment, but in relation to every city boasting mountain temples, notably both Athens' acropolis and the seven hills of Rome!

Whether this victory would quiet the environmentalist's protest against Luke's mountain removal is, of course, another question: probably not, we would answer, mountains being the whole ecology that they are, each one precious to its environmentalist beholder. Unless, that is, religious faith enters into the balance to counter this antipathy, which, we want to argue, it clearly does for Luke, although of course not in reference to a contemporary environmentalist sensitivity or agenda. The rhetoric of mountain removal makes sense only in the context of faith in God, conceived either as having power over the material world so as to be able to move mountains, i.e. as their creator would; or, as spiritually powerful to either co-opt or overwhelm the religious powers associated with such sites. Or, if both material and spiritual realities are linked together, then also as both Creator and Holy Spirit. Both are, of course, manifest throughout the Gospel of Luke, and fortuitously, perhaps, for our argument, also in our readings for this Sunday.

The Holy Spirit enters our narrative with the elderly Zechariah when he sees for the first time the child promised by the angel to his wife Elizabeth,--the child who "even before his birth . . . will be filled with the Holy Spirit," according to the angel (1: 15). Zechariah is now also himself "filled with the Holy Spirit" (1:67) and prophesies that John will be empowered to "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." The forgiveness of sins, we suggest, is for Luke the salvation that is so powerful as to displace worship at sacred precincts, not only in Jerusalem but everywhere among the nations, in favor of the freedom for "worship and holiness of life" it makes possible. As Johnson observes, for Luke "more than any other NT author," forgiveness of sins is "a concomitant and sign of salvation" (Johnson, p. 46).

At the same time, notably, Zechariah also identifies the child as the future prophet of "the Most High," the name for God also used by the angel Gabriel in his announcement to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (1:35). This title, the "Most High," is highly significant

not only relative to Luke's interest in the book of Isaiah, but it is also, remarkably enough as we shall see, related to our interest in the God of creation and our care of creation.

As important as “the plan of God” is for Luke's appropriation of elements of Isaiah's prophecy, as described by Peter Mallen, we would argue that of equal or even greater significance is the character of God embedded in the non-Mosaic models and metaphors that Luke drew from Isaiah, in particular from chapters 40-55 or Second Isaiah. The name “Most High” is key to illuminating the creational aspect of this character. William P. Brown shows that Second Isaiah is one of seven great “pillars of Creation” in the Hebrew Bible, alongside Genesis 1:1-2:3; 2:4b-3:24; Job 38-41; Psalm 104; Proverbs 8:22-31, and the reflections of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 and 12:1-7. Each of these pillars, Brown argues, is “worthy of reflection but each incomplete by itself (William P. Brown, *The Seven pillars of Creation; The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*, Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 6). Second Isaiah's pillar of creation is unique in that its author is . . .

as much a poet carefully crafting stanzas as he is a prophet boldly announcing a new reality. Unlike other creation traditions, there is no self-contained account that effectively summarizes the author's perspective. Not confined to a single passage, creation language is interwoven into the prophet's historically bound pronouncements. Creation does not confine itself to the primordial past but extends into, invades even, the present. Included in God's creation is Israel's formation, and Israel's redemption is folded into God's continuing work in creation (Brown, p. 198).

Out of the conditions of Babylonian exile, the prophet creates a vision of a creation as “fashioned for habitation, including Israel's”:

The heavens and the earth are God's works in progress, but in different ways. Whereas the earth is “hammered out” and its foundations laid, the heavens are “spread” or “stretched out.” The contrast between the celestial and the terrestrial is unmistakable, so also the divergence between Genesis and Isaiah. In Genesis 1, the heavens are associated with 'hammering” in the form of a solid “firmament”. . . , firmly demarcating the realm of the transcendent (see Gen 1:6-7). In Isaiah, however, the heavens are likened to stretchable, unfurled fabric (see also Ps 104:2b), with the earth itself cast as a firmament (Brown, p. 201).

The cosmos and the community are both God's creation and are thus “wedded together:”

“God's intention for creation is habitation, not “waste” or “darkness,” and seeking God can only take place in a reconstituted land, not one emptied and left dark For the poet of the exile, a land “emptied” or “wasted” by exile and darkened by the lengthening shadows of its ruins constitutes the very antithesis of creation. “Seek me” in life-sustaining creation is God's invitation to a displaced and despairing people. Seeking God in a wasteland, on the other hand, is simply a waste (Brown, pp. 203-04).

If the people in exile have left behind a land in waste, the prophet proposes that they should return to re-inhabit it, the new exodus.

The character of God that emerges from this portrait of creation and community is such as to make that exodus a genuine possibility. As Brown suggests, “God in Second Isaiah” is preeminent creator, indomitable warrior, and impassioned savior, all wrapped into one” (Brown, p. 204). God's power for creation is so absolute as to “encompass fundamentally opposing phenomena.” The God of Second Isaiah is more powerful than the God of Genesis 1, by virtue of the fact that in Genesis, God's “first act of creation is the domain of light, which separates the pre-existent darkness. In Isaiah, God creates *both* darkness and light.” God's preeminence, however, is not a comparative matter: “I am YHWH, and there is no other,” God says; “besides me there is no god” (45: 5). At the root of God's incomparability is God's lifelong sustaining care: YHWH is “unmatchable in forbearance and incomparable in commitment, ever demonstrated from Israel's 'birth' to 'old age,' from beginning to end.” God is the one “who forms light and creates darkness; who makes weal and creates woe; I YHWH, make all these things. (45:6b-7a) (Brown, p. 206).

YHWH's singular status as the incomparable one was not always the case, however. That condition, Brown shows, was rather “the end product of a long history of religious development” that culminated with the poetry of Second Isaiah. Before the exile, YHWH was supreme but not alone, “one deity among others, all distinguished from Elyon, 'the Most High,' otherwise known as El, the chief deity and 'father' of the gods.” Scholarly research in the history of Israel's religion has shown that “late biblical traditions, including “Second Isaiah,” effectively merged these two divine figures into a single deity, who then proceeded to assimilate the characteristics of many, though not all, of the abandoned deities. With Second Isaiah, the list had become long and highly differentiated: warrior, shepherd, king, comforter, lover, husband, potter, father, mother, Holy One, redeemer, covenant-maker, and finally creator. This “ composite personality . . . can't be reduced to any one attribute, “ Brown insists, and “only one of these attributes is more fundamental than the others.” In a process Brown calls “theological singularization,” “new divine qualities emerged not shared by any other deity, reflecting a process of theological evolution *and* revolution, of gradual development punctuated by creative innovation.” Thus YHWH's “transcendent status rises above the myriad attributes and roles that are ascribed to the deity:” “God's most central role is also, not coincidentally, the one that fits God's transcendent status most fully: creator. The creator of all is 'above' all. God creates both darkness and light, the old and the new. YHWH is a divine singularity, incomparable and exclusively divine, whose creative reach knows no bounds” (Brown, pp. 217-219).

If such a view of God's character was 'nothing less than an emergence from the fertile soil of religious thought upended by social trauma,” what better resource could be found for Luke's narrative of the spread of the Gospel out from a destroyed Jerusalem to the ends of the inhabited world? Second Isaiah's YHWH could be seen as the creator of the one great tent of the cosmos, under which there was room for each and every nation, for whom God could be and do whatever needed being and doing, in order to bring salvation to every bit of earth, and to restore the earth from wasteland to homeland. But first, we would suggest, those mountains of despair where idols dwelt and priests offered false consolation over the dead bodies of animal sacrifices, had to go. Then, if Luke's highway engineer brings the mountains low, he will also fashion waterways in the desert. God does a new thing, the prophet assures us: If YHWH separated the waters in the old exodus, now YHWH brings water into the land. “Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness,

rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Isaiah, 43:16-2; Brown, p. 203). So if Luke's narrative of the life of Jesus begins with flattened mountains, it will lead to water welling up in the desert, so that nothing is lacking for the new beginning of a new creation.

This turn of the narrative reminds us that there was another role for Yahweh in Second Isaiah's palette, one not listed earlier: gardener. As William Brown notes, the “comfort” YHWH offers the people of Israel as they re-gather “dirties itself with transforming the desolate land into a veritable garden paradise.” The prophet's language is “rich with metaphors and images drawn from the realm of horticulture.” His “discourse covers a remarkable range of botanical diversity, from the lowly brier (55:13) to the most majestic trees, the cedar of Lebanon (41:19; 44:14) . . . 'Second Isaiah' contains a veritable catalogue of flora.” Creation accordingly occurs not only from on high, with God “single-handedly creating light and life, darkness and woe,” but also “emerges from below, from the ground up” (Brown, p. 206). How much the author of Luke actually utilized of all this from his favorite source, we may never know; but the readings from Luke this Sunday point us to a good beginning. On the horizon, one can envision a restored creation; the Most High is a good deal greener than one might at first expect.

The view of God that emerges from the pages of *Laudato Si' is* remarkably consonant with the Isaianic view described here. For Christians, Francis insists, responsibility within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator, are “an essential part of their faith.” Accordingly, when “we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions,” it “is good not just for ourselves, but for humanity and the world at large.” Core convictions drawn from the Biblical accounts of creation

suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself. . . [T]hese three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over the earth (cf. Gn 1:28), to till and keep it” (Gn 2:15) As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gn 3:17-19.) (Par. 66)

This is a key concern for Francis: “Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's im

Here, too, then, God is clearly “most high”: “A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable,” Francis writes. “That is how we end up worshipping earthly power, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot” (Par. 75) At the same time, however, God the Creator is bent on creating and sustaining creatures in webs of relationship. “ In the Bible, the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected” (Par. 73). Precisely as “image of God,” “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes” (Par. 69). In God, “affection and strength are joined;” “all

sound spirituality” thus “entails both welcoming divine love and adoration, confident in the Lord because of his infinite power. As creation, the universe “can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion (Par. 76. As seen here, language for God in the Encyclical is lamentably lacking in inclusive gender). The universe, this means,

did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion. Creation is of the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things . . . Every creature is thus the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection (Par. 77).

And this gift of creation is one which continues giving: “Shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern” in the universe “countless forms of relationship and participation,” the whole of it “open to God's transcendence, within which it develops” (Par. 79). God's “divine presence, which ensures the subsistence and growth of each being, 'continues the work of creation.' The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge” (Par. 80). All creatures move forward together “toward a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things” (Par. 83).

The perspective of Christian faith on creation is thus profoundly ecological. The “High God” is also radically relational, providing habitat for all creatures in a “Common Home” “The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. (Par 84). The inescapably relational character of the creation is indeed a manifestation of God's very being as triune:

The divine Person's are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationship. Creatures tend toward God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend toward other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfillment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures (Par. 240).

As the bishops of Japan put it, “To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God's love and hope” (Par 85).

Just so, Jesus invites his followers “to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures. Himself in “constant touch with nature lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder,” he “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world” (Par. 96-97.) He “lived in full harmony with creation” (Par. 98) and is “present

throughout creation by his universal Lordship.” “Thus the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them toward fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence” (Par. 100) It is surely right and proper that in this season of Advent we await the news of his incarnation with ever increasing joy.

A Petition for the Second Sunday of Advent

Our distorted understanding of dominion has caused us to forget that everything—even the planet’s last speck of dust—is imbued with your radiant presence. Quiet us, that we may hear the valleys and the mountains and the hills announcing your prophetic vision—a vision that always chooses mutuality over force and intimacy over indifference.

Hymn Suggestions for Second Sunday of Advent

Title	ELW	GTG	Other
All Earth is Hopeful	266		
Blessed Be the God of Israel	250, 552	109	
Comfort, Comfort Now My People	256	87	
Earth’s Scattered Isles and Contoured Hills			SWMN 196
For Beauty of Meadows			CH 696
God, Whose Firm is All Creation	734		
God, You Spin the Whirling Planets		23	
Light Dawns On A Weary World	726	79	
Look and Learn			SBL 24
Lord Our God, with Praise We Come	730		
Lord, Your Hands Have Formed This World	554		
On Jordan’s Banks the Baptist Cry	249	96	
Prepare the Royal Highway	264	106	
Restless Weaver			CH 658
The Garden Needs Our Tending Now			SWMN 21
There’s A Voice in the Wilderness	255		

Sources:

- CH** *Chalice Hymnal*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995
- EAS** *Earth and All Stars: Hymns and Songs for Young and Old*. Herb Brokering. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003. (For Lois Brokering’s tune to “Everything Is One”, see Augsburg anthem 9781451482898)
- ELW** *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- GTG** *Glory to God: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.
- SBL** *Sent By the Lord: Songs of the World Church Vol. 2*. The Iona Community, ed. John Bell. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1990

SWMN *Sing of the World Made New: Hymns of Justice, Peace, and Christian Responsibility.* Carol Stream and Chicago, IL: Hope Publishing and GIA, 2014.