

Eco-Justice Commentary on the Common Lectionary for Year C (2015)
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The Fourth Sunday of Advent in Year C (December 20, 2015)

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:46b-55

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

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. In spite of the "flattened earth" and the "ax lying at the roots of the trees," imagery of the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, we have found ample encouragement for care of creation in the lectionary for these first three Sundays. As we wrote,

We are thus once again put on notice that Christ's coming into our world entails a radical reversal of the fortunes of the unjust powers that dominate human history, so that God's intention with the creation might at the last be completely fulfilled. People of faith will be oriented anew to the cosmos of which we are members as the creation of God moves toward completion and even perfection, not on the basis of its own inherent powers, but by virtue of the will of its creator (Comment on First Sunday of Advent).

Even if this means confronting severe ecological crisis on a global scale, these readings confirm, the theological affirmations of these texts are a match for the challenge: The Most High of the Lukan narrative is the sovereign creator of all who brings into being "light and life, darkness and woe," from above, but who also "from below, from the ground up," transforms "the desolate land into a veritable garden paradise" (Comment on Second Sunday of Advent). Although John the Baptist's call for repentance and reformation of behavior explicitly addresses only issues of social justice, his warning about the coming judgment in terms of the "ax lying at the roots of the trees" opens up the text to provide a basis for addressing the ecological crisis in our time with similarly appropriate responses to the degradation of habitat and atmosphere across the earth. More powerfully, his announcement of the coming near of the Lord employs the metaphor of the farmer who comes with winnowing fork in hand, one who enlists the cosmic forces of water, wind, and fire for the restoration of the earth. "The primordial elements needed for new creation are thus gathered, and all the earth awaits the day when 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God'" (Comment on the Third Sunday of Advent). So the readings for the first three Sundays of the Advent season do indeed look forward with great joy to the restoration and completion of God's creation; they enlist us in actions toward that goal which are grounded in faith in God as the creator of all, and in the One who is coming near to us in the midst of the crisis of the world.

We have also found that each set of texts finds strong resonance with Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudate Si.* His careful consideration of the several dimension of the crisis challenges his readers to ask fundamental questions of the meaning of human existence. But if there is reason to see in the crisis grounds for despair, there is also reason for hope. It is time, he insists, to speak of the integrity of eco-systems and of human life together, in confidence that the Lord for whom we wait in this season of Advent is one who "makes all things new." This confidence, we found, is grounded in a view of God that is consonant with Luke's "Most High", the one who creates "our common home" out of love, and so values every creature as they exist within a universe filled with

possibilities for new creation. He is clear about the "ax lying at the root of the trees of our common home: it is an expectation of human mastery over nature driven by the technological paradigm. But he is also clear that genuine hope resides in the "stump" of an "integral ecology" that can give rise not only to a restored relationship between humanity and nature, but also great improvements in human society, especially on behalf of the poor. But realization of that hope lies in an "ecological conversion," his call for which rings with the challenge of John the Baptist' call for repentance.

Now in the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, this good news is recapitulated in the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, and especially in Mary's Magnificat. As they meet, Elizabeth becomes a spirit-filled reader of signs of the new creation: "the child leaped in her womb" and, filled with the Holy Spirit, she identifies Mary as "mother of my Lord." The verb "leaped," Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "suggests an eschatological recognition (Ps 113:4 [LXX] and Mal 4:2)"; Elizabeth understands that the child's leap is an expression of "eschatological 'gladness (*agalliasis*)' promised by the angel to greet John's birth (1:14)." With her response, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (1:47), Mary joins and enlarges on Elizabeth's pronouncement of joy: Mary's child is the promised "savior." As Johnson writes,

In the Magnificat, Mary's praise for what God had done to her personally widens out to include what God does for "all who fear him" in every age, including what God is doing for Israel by the birth of its Messiah One cannot avoid the sense that Mary is here made the representative if not the personification of Israel." The mercy shown her reflects and exemplifies the mercy shown to the people We notice as well that the epithets applied to God in the song are attributes as well of the son she is carrying. God is called "Lord" and "Savior" and "holy." So Jesus has already been called "holy" (1:34), and "lord" (1:43), and will shortly be termed "savior" as well (2:11). As with name so with function: God reverses human status and perception: in a downward movement, he scatters the arrogant, pulls down the mighty, sends the rich away empty. But God also, in an upward movement, exalts the lowly, fills the hungry, and takes the hand of Israel (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991; pp. 41-42).

Nowhere in this recital of expectations is there an explicit mention of care of creation as response to ecological crisis, of course. The crisis of the *oikumene* is rather conceived in terms of the conceit of those who seek domination over others. As David Tiede writes,

In direct contrast to the mercy which God shows *to those who fear him from generation to generation*, God scatters *the proud in the imagination of their hearts*. God does not deal with appearances, but "knows the heart" of all humanity without respect to status, as does also the Messiah (see Luke 11:17). Thus, as in Gen. 6:5 where God "saw . . . the wickedness of man . . . and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually leading to the flood, so now the coming of Jesus will mean, in Simeon's words "that [secret] thoughts out of many hearts will be revealed" (2:35)(David Tiede, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988; p. 56).

All things human do therefore fall within the reach of this salvation. The salvation Mary envisions is in this sense all-encompassing. As Tiede writes:

No dimension of human life or culture will lie beyond the lordship of this Messiah. All systems, ideologies, and social structures may be judged by this new standard of divine justice and mercy—which does not mean that Jesus' reign will simply displace all the social, political, or economic systems of the world, at least not yet. But their claim to ultimacy of 'divine right' and their ability to justify the rights and privileges of all their subjects have been challenged by the prophetic word of Mary's son (Tiede, pp. 56-7).

The place of the proud at the center of the *oikumene* will be taken by the "servant" (Isaiah 41:8) who fulfills God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 17:7; 18:18; and 22:17).

That the promised salvation does nonetheless embrace all creation remains for this narrative an inference to be drawn from the collected affirmations of these texts, the most significant of which are the assignment of titles to her child as belong to God, and, with a nod in the direction of our two lessons, the "facts on the ground" of Mary's pregnancy (Micah 5:3-4) and the "body you have prepared for me" in her womb (Hebrews:10:5). We therefore return to the statement with which we closed the comment on the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent in Year B of the lectionary

Mary's faith and obedience calls for a radical re-orientation to the finite creation as capable of infinity (*finitum capax infiniti*) from all those who identify with Mary. Larry Rasmussen states the significance of this re-orientation this way:

"God is in the facts themselves," said Bonhoeffer, asserting his conviction that God is amidst the living events of nature and history. His favorite quotation from F. C. Oetinger said much the same: "The end of the ways of God is bodiliness." The meaning of *finitum capax infiniti* is simple enough: God is pegged to earth. So if you would experience God, you must fall in love with earth. The infinite and transcendent are dimensions of what is intensely at hand. Don't look 'up' for God, look around. The finite is all there is, because all *that* is, is *there* (*Earth Community Earth Ethics*, p. 272-73).

Put differently in words that reflect Augustine's understanding that our bodies are "the dirt we carry," the dust of the earth from which all living creatures are made, Jesus included, reflects God's glory, and calls for appropriately infinite respect. The church came in due time to confess Mary as *theotokos*, "God bearer." She understood herself to be Servant of the Lord (Luke 1:38). Those who care for creation will celebrate her service to the Servant of Creation, who in his suffering on the cross served God by loving the earth and all its creatures as God loves them.

Pope Francis pictures Mary's role similarly, albeit in characteristically Roman perspective. The "Mother who cared for Jesus," Mary "now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world. Just as her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power." She is attentive to the cries of "our common home," who as Francis lamented in the opening of his letter,

"cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness

evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom, 220. We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gn 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her water (Par. 2)

But Mary is also "the Queen of all Creation" who "completely transfigured,"

now lives with Jesus, and all creatures sing of her fairness. She is the Woman, "clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1) Carried up into heaven, she is the Mother and Queen of all creation. In her glorified body, together with the Risen Christ, part of creation has reached the fullness of its beauty. She treasures the entire life of Jesus in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 51), and now understands the meaning of all things. Hence, we can ask her to enable us to look at this world with eyes of wisdom (Par. 241).

And wondrously, in the Eucharist, her experience becomes our own:

"The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God (Par. 236).

And so, as the season of Advent turns into the Season of Christmas, we might join in singing not only Mary's Magnificat, but also the canticle of St. Francis of Assisi, *Laudato Si', mi' Signore*," "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs."

A Petition for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Mary sings of a world turned upside-down. The lowly are exalted. The hungry are filled. The servant is never alone. May these holy refrains, echoing from one generation to another, become our heart song. May the struggle for a new day in the house of this world never take away the joy of our hope that finds its home in you.

Hymn Suggestions for Fourth Sunday of Advent

Title	ELW	GTG	Other
God the Sculptor of the Mountains	736	5	
Like a Mother Who has Borne Us		44	
Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth	735	7	
My Soul Cries Out	723	100	
My Soul Give Glory to My God		99	CH 130
My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness	251		
Reckless Extravagance, Laughter and Daring			SWMN 29
The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came	265		
The Earth is the Lord's and the Fullness			SWMN 24

Thereof			
Touch the Earth Lightly	739		
Unexpected and Mysterious	258		
We Are Not Our Own			CH 689
Who Would Think That What Was Needed		138	SWMN 28
Womb of Life and Source of Being		3	

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.