

[Title] Introduction to the Theme

[A] Keeping the Earth

As people of faith, how do we respond, when scientists tell us that climate change is nearing a tipping point that may bring catastrophic changes beyond our control, when species extinction rates reach new heights, when the impacts of rising hunger and the scarcity of clean water harm ever more millions of people worldwide?

In 1993 a social statement the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America identified caring for creation as a “profoundly spiritual matter.”¹ Well before 1993 and the formal church statement, some in the faith community were awakening to the realization that caring for our Earth, God’s creation, is indeed a matter of vital importance. How we understand our relationship to God and our place in God’s creation has a lot to do with how we understand our role and what we are called by God to do on this Earth.

In 2010 there will be a number of celebrations to mark the 40th anniversary of the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970). Initially the Church came late to this movement. But since the mid to late 1990’s, there has been a growing swell of *earthkeeping* awareness and action throughout the church. There are green congregations and congregational earthkeeping teams; there are green synods and a move towards making new church buildings energy efficient or even LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified. Lutheran camps have incorporated nature appreciation and lessons into their offerings for many years.

The spiritual implications are profound. We take hope in the steadfast love of our Creator God, who has made all things with wisdom and grace; we take hope in the deep love and

¹ Prologue: *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*—ELCA Social Statement. Copyright © September 1993 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

power of Jesus Christ, who walks beside us in all things; and we find hope, vision, and fresh energy in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who moves through us and all of creation, to “renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30).

There are some who name our time as a *Kairos* moment – a window of time that is ripe with possibilities – a time of both urgency and hope, when the Spirit is calling us forth anew. What an exciting, enlivening time to be listening for God’s voice! In your camp settings this year, may these materials help you to hear that voice in fresh ways: within creation itself, within your campers and staff, and within God’s written Word.

[C] Made in God’s image

“Who are we?” and “Why are we here?” are probably two of the oldest, and ongoing, questions for humankind. We yearn to know and live out our truest identity; and we often feel that we are living our lives to the fullest, ultimately, when we do so with a meaningful purpose. This is a task for every generation, arising out of the unique context, challenges, and needs of a particular place and time. From a religious perspective, this is part of the heart and mind’s journey of faith seeking understanding that is the essence of doing theology – an adventure that is for all baptized believers and not just those formally designated as theologians.

As God’s people, we have access to special resources to help us discover and discern our answers. We can find guidance through prayer and Holy Scripture, and within our worshipping communities, in discussion, learning, and liturgical settings. We believe that God has formed us and all things, and that God has a plan for our lives. Unfortunately, all too often many of God’s people have thought that God’s plan is only for us, and they

have quite separated themselves from the rest of creation, which God also loves and has blessed and pronounced as good and very good.

Our sinful and selfish nature has likely helped to often skew the interpretation of the Genesis 1 creation account and the true meaning of *dominion*. That word, and role, was never meant to be an excuse for arrogant domination and abuse of God's good creation. Perhaps it is that false perspective that also makes us tend to hear that God loves *people* so much that he sent his son. But the word in the familiar biblical passage is *world*. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son ..." (John 3:16). In the original Greek, the term is *cosmos*. God's love is deeper and broader and more inclusive than we can even imagine.

The Spirit is indeed moving in our world and religious communities in powerful and fresh ways in our time. Biblical texts can come alive and prompt new understandings about our place and role in creation. Bridges are being built between ecology and theology, between environmental activism and eco-justice focused *earthkeeping* by many in the faith community.

It often takes some kind of an epiphany, an Aha! experience, to open the door to a new way of seeing and hearing God's call to care for the Earth. While it is the Holy Spirit and God's grace that brings the conversion that leads to new understanding and actions, counselors and teachers can do much to prepare the way within our camp settings. Your role is key, so be sure to take time for your own prayer and spiritual preparation, and to become familiar and at home with the plants, creatures, and natural landforms of your camp's ecosystems. In addition to utilizing the guidance of the Bible passages that will be

used during this week, seek to cultivate an attitude of joy and wonder among your campers for the natural world around them.

Help them to see that because we have been created in the image of God, we have a truly special role to play in God's world today. God is inviting us, and creation waits with eager longing.

[C] God's covenant with all creation

Every single one of us exists within a vast web of relationships – from the way the microscopic processes of our body's cells function together, to how we connect to family and friends, to where and how we live in an ecosystem and bioregion, to the farthest reaches of space, and the galaxies and planets that dance together. All things are interconnected. There is a wonderful expression of this reality in Colossians 1:15-17: In Christ all things hold together. In Christ there is a nexus where grace meets and connects theology and ecology. Connections and relationship abound! The Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is inherently comprised of the deepest, interpersonal mutuality, relationship, and love. The story of God, throughout the Bible, is one of God's continual reaching out to humankind, to invite, to form life-giving relationship: "I will be your God and you will be my people." (Jeremiah 7:23) The story culminates in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ our Lord, who forms us into the Body of Christ on earth, through a new, sacred covenant (see Luke 22:19-20).

Our place and role in God's creation is guided by covenants, both old and new. They all call us into relationships based on love, justice, mercy and peace. Humans are formed out of the very elements and clay of the earth (Genesis 2:7-8) and asked to serve the garden

in partnership with God. Noah and his family are called into covenant with God and with all living things upon the Earth (Genesis 9:8-17). In the new covenant of our life in Christ, we are made new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) and called to ministries of reconciliation. Such reconciliation, in the name of Christ, is for all our brothers and sisters, and for all of our relations in all of creation; and it is predicated upon the repairing and restoration of relationships that foster just, sustainable life for all. God graciously invites us to relationship, and creation waits, with eager longing.

[C] Abiding in the vine

It's our connection to the source that keeps us going! There's a lot of talk about renewable energy these days. As followers of Jesus, we have the ultimate and abundant source of energy for our lives. Through the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we are reborn children of God. This new life in Christ offers us joy and peace, and comfort in our times of challenge and pain. We are also called, gifted, and empowered for discipleship, from the time of our very baptism, when we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit, forever.

We each, then, have a *vocation* in God's world -- a role to fill, in helping to build and live into the kingdom of God. How often do we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven?" Do we think this prayer is an invitation for us to just sit back and wait for God to act? Of course not. We pray that we may be a part of that kingdom, enjoy the abundance God has provided and have an active role in its flourishing.

Jesus, in his life and teachings, often lifted up the values of the kingdom: the lowly are raised up; the sick are healed; mercy, justice, and compassion will guide decisions and actions. In the ecological age we need to see that the values of Christ's kingdom also call us to faithful earthkeeping. For healing the Earth is also about loving our neighbors and fostering mercy, justice, peace, and a sustainable, healthy quality of life for all. O Lord, your kingdom come, on Earth, and show us our part in its realization in our lives and world!

It is only through God's grace and the Spirit's power, that our efforts in Christ's name are also magnified well beyond what little we can do on our own. Jesus, our brother and Lord, gives us the love and encouragement to keep on, even in the face of what may seem insurmountable ecological challenges. Jesus' life and teachings can also offer helpful models for our awakening earthkeeping awareness and eco-justice inspired actions. In many places in the Gospels, we read of Jesus going up a mountain or into the wilderness to pray; and he often used images and metaphors from nature, to make a point in a parable. His advice to consider the lilies and look at the birds of the air (Matthew 6:25ff) shows Jesus as someone who paid attention to what he saw and learned in nature. We might also draw lessons from Jesus' display of righteous anger, as he turned over tables and drove the unjust money-changers from the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45). What injustices in our world stir up our own righteous anger? What are some things that need to change?

Finally, we act out of deep gratitude for the abundant life that is ours, through Christ, and with an understanding that abundance is something far more precious than material goods. We find true abundance in the love we receive from God and from the depth and

quality of relationships in our lives. Out of this abundance, we also share with others, and we find the abundant and renewable energy to do all that we can, to help heal the Earth. We pray, earnestly, with all our heart, and listen for God's voice and invitation, for what we are called to do, and creation waits with eager longing.

[C] Joining the hymn of all creation

All of creation sings praises to the creator. We are invited to find our voice and join the chorus. It is an invitation from God to nurture the mystic and empower the prophet that is in us all.

We believe that God is transcendent, above and beyond all things in holy and mighty glory. We also believe that God is with us - a God who is immanent and as close as our own breath. To be a mystic, in the Christian sense, simply describes someone who is more deeply attuned to God's presence throughout the whole of creation. Such a person might also be described as being spiritually contemplative. Any person of faith, really, can seek to nurture his or her contemplative side. We discover in this contemplative, spiritually grounded awareness of God's presence an element of traditional Christian mysticism.

Some may wonder whether experiencing God's presence in creation is something akin to *pantheism* – the worship of nature or parts of nature *as* God. But that is far from the case in Christian tradition. However, we can meet God, or learn about God, through creation.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Romans 1:19-20)

Experiencing God's presence and communing with God within a natural setting can be a doorway to a deeper level of personal spirituality and connection to God. The camp experience, on many levels, is aimed at helping participants to draw nearer to God and to become more fully formed and shaped in their faith. So we can celebrate God's presence in creation, as well as among and in us, and in our houses of worship.

From an eco-theological perspective, knowing God in creation includes experiencing the joy, wonder, awe and gratitude that is evoked by beautiful, natural places, and their creatures, flowers, or amazing sunrises or sunsets – but it goes beyond and deeper than that, as well. Those moments rightly call forth our praise to our Creator God. How often are we aware, though, that we are a part of the whole tapestry of creation, in which all members – human and other than human – yearn to join in that ongoing hymn of praise? Grasping that reality can help to deepen our faith, joy, and connection to our awesome Creator. It helps us to find and know our place in the choir. Creation waits with eager longing.

[C] Finding our voice

Whether it is through a special encounter with God in nature or Scripture or other ways, when one draws closer to God, there is an increased likelihood that he or she will also feel called to speak out, or take action, in some perhaps difficult, prophetic way. We need that closeness to God and the way it nurtures us to be able to speak boldly in Christ's name.

Within any challenge, there also lies opportunity. God's creation cries out in pain. The ecological urgency of our times and the ethical, religious obligation to respond lead us to uphold justice and reconciliation for all of creation—for the cosmos. This week together

at camp can present great opportunities for new awareness, understanding, and ideas for action.

Sometimes, environmental awareness can be construed as having political overtones. One of the best remedies, perhaps, is to continually ground ourselves in God's Word and to note that the condition of God's *world* – creation – calls for some kind of faithful response, as a matter of basic justice and out of gratitude to God for all we receive from creation. In many places in the world, there are too many people going hungry, lacking water, and undergoing increased suffering, because of environmental degradation – and yes, the increasing harmful impacts of climate change. Trust that our Lord will send surprises, wonders, and blessings, if eyes and hearts are open to receive them. Simply fostering attitudes of appreciation for nature and encouraging closer observation of even small things, like spider webs, flowers, or beautifully marked beetles, can bring new insights. Creation waits with eager longing.

[C] Keeping the Earth

Keeping the Earth is the overarching theme for the whole week, and is up in some way each day at camp. Even in the midst of huge environmental challenges in our world, we can begin to view creation's eager longing as a gracious invitation from our God. And we know that when God calls, God also supplies what we need, to fulfill that call. We are being invited to know ourselves more deeply, as God's children. We are being invited to more truly understand our place in God's world. We are being invited to go forth more hopeful, and inspired, to look for ways to *green* our homes and our congregations and more faithfully care for creation.