



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## “Nature or God?”

### Psalm 19; Romans 1:18-25; Matthew 6:25-34

This morning, we meet on a day when the temperatures here are 5-10 degrees above normal. We have beautiful sunshine, on another dry, warm day. But 300 miles south of us, wildfires are raging through miles and miles of land, burning up hundreds and hundreds of homes, closing freeways and threatening power lines. The California state budget is totally out of whack, and the costs of fighting these fires drives it further into the red. Firefighting helicopters fly over reservoirs nearly emptied by the drought, sucking up more of the precious water to dump on the flames.

Given all of this, the Bible texts today may seem odd, but I think we might hear God’s voice today, in spite of that. Open your Bibles, please, to Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome—the sixth book of our New Testaments, the book of Romans. I want to start with a part of chapter one, after Paul has given his usual greetings and introduction. Listen with me for God’s Word to us today, as I read these words aloud, starting in verse 18. *[text]*

Paul wants to make some basic things very clear. The pagan culture in which he lived—Greek, and Roman—was corrupt in politics and morals. Paul traces this corruption to a mistaken understanding of Creation. The pagans had no God who is Creator and Sustainer of life. In pagan religions, the whole world is populated by spirits, in every tree, cloud, and piece of land and water—earth, air, fire, and water, to use the ancient categories. These spirits needed to be appeased, and so rituals and sacrifices were developed to soothe these spirits so that life for the worshippers would be pleasant. Acting out dramas with spirit characters, people in effect were worshipping birds, animals—all kinds of things in these categories.

When people came to Christ under his leadership, Paul brought them to Jesus and away from these lesser things that often involved fertility rites and orgies. These are insulting to God, Paul argued, for they give highest value to things God created, instead of to God, Himself. Because people were living this lie and preferred these false gods, the Creator has let them follow their preferences and hungers, and the consequences have been piling up.

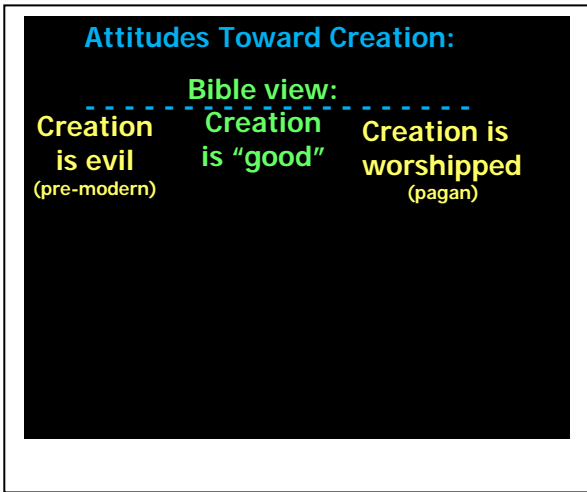
Unfortunately, Christians since Paul’s time have taken his words as a rejection of any value in Creation, and that’s also a distortion. Listen to the words of Genesis, chapter 1—the very beginning of God’s Word about our world. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. . . . The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 1:1-2a, 17, 31a; 2:15 [NIV])

And in the LAST book of our Bibles, the book of Revelation, God shows John the Elder that God will bring a new creation, and set it down here amidst the ashes of the planet’s destruction. From beginning to end, God is Creator.

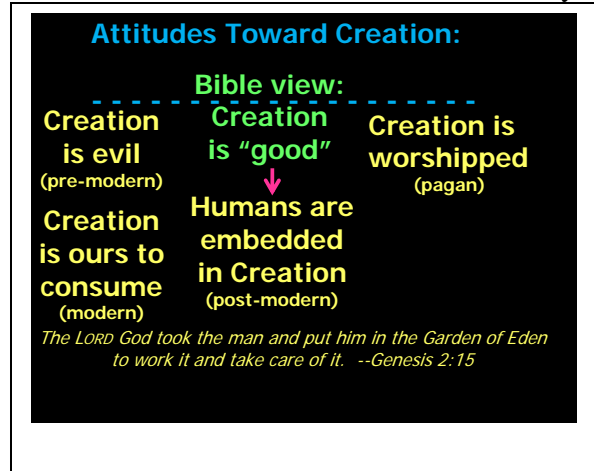
Creation is awesome. And Genesis tells us, God thinks creation is very good.

The Bible celebrates creation and the Creator, and nowhere else more obviously than in Israel’s worship book, the Psalms. Here is Psalm 19—though I could have picked out any number of passages. Listen for God’s Word to you and me again, as I read these words aloud.  
[text]

The Bible celebrates creation, clear enough. And, we’ve looked at the attitude of some Greek philosophies toward creation—rejecting its value, seeing it as only a shadow of a bigger reality, as Plato taught. But there’s one more view of Creation I want to identify this morning. It comes from the period of incredible change called, The Enlightenment. The Enlightenment in Europe brought a whole new attitude toward matter and creation. The Enlightenment brought about the rise of science all through the culture. “Man” became the measure of all things; humanism was the religion of the modern era. As science progressed to the Industrial Revolution, creation became understood as a substance to mold and re-make for the purposes of our control and comfort. This “Modern Era” of Western culture was dominant until 15-20 years ago. Today we live more in a “Post-modern Era”, in part because of some results the Modern Era brought us—ecological destruction, and threats like increasing tyranny and brutality in many places thanks to technology. Whereas both the Pre-modern and Modern periods saw humans as separate from nature, the Postmodern period sees humanity as part of nature—which is actually more in line with the creation accounts in our Bibles.



Another thing the Postmodern period brings us is a high value on “tolerance”—of world views, religions, lifestyles, and much more. There is good and bad about that. Part of the bad is that Postmoderns do not believe there is any absolute truth. “You have your truth, and I have my



truth,” they’ll say. So in line with this, perhaps you, too, have noticed the upsurge of paganism, Wicca and other pantheistic religions in the West—or, at least the public display of their festivals—the events at Stonehenge, and other places, at the Solstice times of the year. These other religions come close to worshipping nature, and that’s not acceptable to the God revealed in the Bible.

Let’s sum up: the Modern attitude of exploiting Nature violates what God tells us in Genesis about caring for the Garden in which we live. Paganism deifies Nature, and that violates

what God tells us in the First Commandment in Exodus (echoed in the words of Paul we just read). What should be our approach to Creation, as Christians, “people of The Book”? From the Bible, it’s clear that we should neither “deify” nor “despoil” God’s creation, but instead, we are to dedicate ourselves to work with God for Creation’s care.

Now, there’s a reason why this topic came up today, after a couple of Sundays when we focused on “worry” and “fear”. What kind of a week has it been for you? Around here, so many people have been working so hard to make our Christmas Fair a success, there’s been little time to worry.

But beyond our church, there have been many reasons to worry in this past week. The economy looks like it will be down for some time, yet. Unemployment is definitely up; the housing crisis continues; the Christmas season looks pretty glum for merchants—and thus for their workers, too. The stock market has reacted to all of this, dropping lower, which affects us all, whether you own stock or not. Banks have been badly burned and don’t want to loan money to hardly anyone, and borrowed money is the grease that keeps the wheels turning in our capitalist economy. Yep, if you were the worrying type, this would have been “your week”!

But stress—another name for worry—is a killer. Max Stevenson had what we think was a minor heart attack, and his doctors say it was stress-related. I saw a report yesterday that again said men with high stress live significantly shorter lives—no surprise there!

So now we’re ready to hear from Jesus. What did Jesus know about worry and stress? We think he lived in a pretty stress-free time, long ago and far away. In fact, we don’t think he was all that smart—he never was anyone of importance politically or economically, he did not have a great education, he never traveled outside his own country. But I think Jesus was a genius—the smartest guy, ever. And he DID have things to teach us about worry. I want to look at one of his most famous passages with you now. Please open your Bibles to Matthew’s gospel, chapter 6, and find verse 25. This is part of Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount”, in which he addresses many of our life concerns. This is the passage on “worry”. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read this passage aloud. *[text]*

Jesus uses logic and the world of sight and smell to make his point. In fact, Jesus often used nature as a teaching tool. Read any of the first three gospels, especially, and you can’t miss Jesus’ ties to nature—things we often miss, because we travel in cars instead of walking everywhere and noticing the world God has given us.

I’ll just tease out a few of his lessons. For one thing, Jesus tells us to concentrate on today—not tomorrow. We can’t do much about tomorrow; all our decisions today to try to control tomorrow could all change in an instant. For example, lots of people thought housing values would continue to always go up, and they could refinance their homes and borrow against the so-called equity to acquire more goodies and investments. That was what the “smart money” was doing, trying to control and improve the future. Well, how well did that work out? That’s just one example recently of how “living in the future” is a fiction.

What if we just lived in the present moment, as Jesus says? Well, if we’re not scurrying around trying to secure the future, we can slow down our stressful pace to a walk, instead of going at freeway speed. At a walk, we can notice so much more of what is around us—what the air feels like, the path under our feet, the incredible colors of fall, the beauty of a sunset. We can take time to just savor special moments, instead of trying to consume them like fast food.

Oh, and we'd notice more about the people around us—our kids, our spouses, our friends. We'd help our kids pick ONE out-of-school activity which we'd support, instead of FIVE—imagine what that would do to our lives! We'd make more of our family dinner time—turn off the TV, and really listen and see each other, instead of just killing time while we stuff our faces and run off to some other activity. Imagine—people really in touch with each other, each evening, taking time to really enjoy the food before them!

Jesus communicates his point by inviting us to observe birds and flowers. Do you have a birdhouse nearby you can watch, or a bird feeder? Can you see—maybe through binoculars—the way the birds tear into the seed you've put out, the work they invest in building a nest, the care they give their little ones? With a bird feeder or a bird house, you are caring for creation, and you get so many benefits for yourself. Interesting system—do what God tells us, and we get blessings!

How about walking in someone's garden, or planting a flower garden of your own—just for the beauty of it. You begin to slow down. You notice the incredible variety and beauty of flowers that seem to have no reason for existing except to make the world beautiful, and feed the bees. Noticing and cultivating, you are caring for creation. Your stress level goes down; gardeners DO live longer. And you can worship right then and there, thanking God the Creator for the Creation He has made and invited you to share.

In these last clear nights before—please God!—we receive the rain we need, get away from city lights, go to the American River Canyon, and look up at the stars. They are like ants—so many, and so active, each one burning with energy, many with whirling planets, billions and billions of them, far beyond what we can see. And you can worship, savoring the wonder that God is still making. Take THAT do bed with you that night, and sleep in the arms of the God who made you to give Him joy in your joy of Him!

When we do what God tells us, what Jesus teaches, life becomes a banquet. We join God in what God is doing, and come to know Him through experience, not just as a belief in our heads. As God heals your busy-ness, as you come to enjoy God more, you'll have a new opportunity to share with others.

For example, someone meets you and asks how you are doing. Here's a line I think God gave me on Friday. Instead of the usually, "fine", why don't you say, "I'm 'way better than 'normal'!" That will invite a query from your friend who may not know God. And you can tell them about your evening in the Canyon, your blessing from the birds and the flowers and the air, your lowered stress level as you slowed to Jesus' speed, and how God blessed you from every one of these things, because you were doing what God told us to do—caring for creation.

Don't you want to be healthy, and live really well? Don't deify nature, nor despoil nature to re-make it for your purposes. Instead, dedicate yourself to care for creation with God, and enjoy more of the life God made you for!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 16, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]