

A Whole New Work: Lutheran Images Of the People of God in Creation

Edward H. Schroeder

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1 Classical Lutheran Images of Creation

The Great Chicago Flood of Holy Week 1992 is too much trouble with too many images to let go to waste—especially when we are reflecting on God's creation. For it provides us some of the classical Lutheran images of the people of God in creation. Many of these images are in Luther's Small Catechism on the first article of the Apostles Creed. But I must confess I did not learn about them when I memorized that catechism in my own parochial schooling and catechesis.

One is the image of **linkage**. Human creatures and God's other creatures are all "one ball of wax." It's not that we humans are here and God's creation is over there, something separate from us to examine or study perhaps, say in gatherings such as this one. When we study God's creation, we wind up at the same place Pogo did when searching for "the enemy," namely: "We have found the creation, and it is us." "**Creation-talk, is always autobiographical.**"

In our confessional heritage this image appears already in the opening line of Luther's explanation of the first article of the Creed. To be sure, that first sentence is badly rendered in most English translations. Even Tappert's rendering in the current standard English edition of the Lutheran Confessions: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists" blurs this image of linkage. So, back to the original text.

"Ich glaube, dass mich Gott geschaffen hat sampt alien Kreaturn." Luther's own words signal the linkage in that word "*sampt*." Creation is a network and we humans are in the network. So when Lutherans talk about creation, the subject under discussion is the network of all that exists, ourselves included. In "computerese," we are **in the loop** of Creation, insiders not outsiders. If you need a visual for network, think of a spider-web, everything connected to everything else, with each of us somewhere on in the web, not off to the side looking at it.

The SC signals another image in that spiderweb: **God has put us in our particular place** in that web-work. The biographical specifics that make me me, Ed Schroeder. are no accident—male, Caucasian, first-born of my siblings, German family roots, Illinois farm, US citizenship, alive in the 20th century, too young to get drafted in WWII, diagnosed diabetic after the discovery of insulin—all of these are "givens" from God. **The givens are gifts.** Creaturehood is existence on the receiving end, the posture of receptivity. And the gifting continues, of course, with all the sustaining, preserving, protective contexts around my intersection on the spiderweb, without which I would never have survived my own birthing. "*Alles ist Gabe*," is the title of a book of Luther's comments on creation.

God's first gift to me is the gift of my own existence. To confess the first article is to confess: "I believe that God has given me **me**— networked with all other creatures." The first person singular pronoun [I, me, my] jumps out especially when the text is read aloud—12 times in the Tappert translation (not quite so frequent in Luther's German). That might sound like human creation-egotism with little concern for the "*samt alien Kreaturn*."

But the accent on me effects the exact opposite when you get to Luther's last line in the explanation —once more rendered poorly in most English translations. Many of us memorized it this way: "And all this purely out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in me. For all of which it is my duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true." The "duty" word is a too-tame rendering of Luther's own "*ich schuldig bin*." I am in debt to God. My account is already short, overdrawn. I'm frightfully in arrears with my obligation "to thank and to praise, to serve and obey."

We could say that we are "stuck" in the spiderweb of creation, and cannot get out, although the thought of escape might be attractive when the divine creditor calls in our chits and our overdrafts. "Stop the creation. I want to get off!" won't work. We're in the loop with all these other creatures. Fact is, the creator uses these other creatures in the loop to deliver the overdue notices. Enter the Chicago River! Here another fundamental image in a Lutheran theology of creation surfaces, namely, the Creator uses creation to critique us, to hold us accountable, even to execute sentence upon us. It's a grim pun in the vocabulary of New Testament Greek: *ktisis* becomes *krisis*.

This an often-unnoticed item, I think, in Romans 8, that **the non-human creatures bring charges against us humans, their co-creatures**. The chapter opens with the radical claim that "There is no criticism any longer for those in Christ Jesus." It concludes with the equally bold claim that "nothing in all creation can separate us" from this Christ. But we can still ask: how might, just might, "anything in all creation" even do that, "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?" (v. 39)

Well here's how: by "bringing charges" against us, by "condemning" us. (v.33f.) And just what might those charges be? Listen how Paul speaks the part of that part of creation that has no speaking voice: "We non-human creatures in the network have been waiting with eager longing for you humans to reveal yourself [to us, for example] as the Creator's own kids in the way you prance around our common spiderweb. We were subjected to futility by your shenanigans, you know, though admittedly not without hope. Yet that hope seems hardly to reside in you humans. For from you has come that bondage to decay which we now suffer, and from which we'd like to be set free. So you and we are groaning in travail together [that's "*samt*"] until now. Aren't you supposed to be God's agents for our freedom, our redemption, so that we too might obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God? Well?" (vv. 19-23) Remember, I'm not making this up. That's what Paul says (even if it is "RSV.")

Enter the Chicago River in Holy Week 1992. *Ktisis* becomes *krisis*, the creation our critic. Finally critiquing us not merely for breaking the so-called second table of the decalogue, our assignment to be caretakers of our fallow creatures. But the Chicago Flood (like its primordial predecessor in Genesis 6-8) brings charges of first-commandment-breaking. We humans, are frightfully in arrears on our accounts with the creator as caretakers on/of the spider web.

In a manner no one of us could have ever imagined, the Chicago River comes on the scene--in Holy Week yet-- as God's prosecuting attorney: "You have been weighed and found wanting. Shape up or else!" (And this *knsis*-word comes to this St. Louisian too. You Chicagoans, for example, wont be drinking the water that puts Chicago River sediment and railroad tunnel sludge into the Des Plaines River, and then into the Illinois River and then into the Mississippi just above St. Louis. But in a few days we in St. Louis will be.) But for us the most important question is not: Whose fault is it? (A question that always comes with the Pharisee-heresy woven into it: "Not my fault. Therefore no repentance needed from me.") When creation critiques us, maybe even inflicting loss as our penalty, sometimes **deadly loss**, the question is: Will you repent? That goes for victims, survivors and on-lookers.

Recall the Gospel of a recent Lenten Sunday about the catastrophe at Siloam where 18 people were killed by a falling tower (sc. bad engineering and/or careless inspection procedures). Jesus articulates the catastrophe's message: "except you repent, you shall all likewise perish." In that text Jesus himself lip-synchs the words for his disciples who did not to hear it as the tower came roaring down. Ditto for the river's rhetoric for us from last week's fluky flood.

In his Large Catechism Luther expands the Small Catechism's theme about creation and criticism. He says:

Much could be said if we were to describe in detail how few people believe this article. pass over it hear it, and recite it but we neither see nor consider what the words enjoin on us (German: *auftragen*). For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and brag and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor and such things of ourselves (*von uns selbs*), as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned {Cave Chicago!} in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride and greed, pleasure and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord and Creator.

Therefore this article would humble and terrify us all if we really believed it. For we sin daily with eyes and ears, hands, body, and soul, money and property, and with all that we have.... For this reason we ought daily to study this article and impress it upon our minds. Everything we see, and every blessing that comes our way, should remind us of it. When we escape danger, we should recognize that this is God's doing. (Tappert p. 412f.)

Creation is gift. Myself and all other creatures in the network is gift. But it is gift that obligates. Even to call it grace does not take away the obligatory item in God's creation-operation. And when just plain folks like us--after the Fall--get checked out on our creation-obligations, we're always over our head in debt, with no way to get caught up on our payments. The ultimate consequences are lethal. As an ELCA pastor told me on the phone Tues. a.m. "Apart from Easter, all we get for living in creation is consequences."

So what does Christ's Easter bring to the creation? The program planners call it "a whole new work." The wholeness is not the new thing. The old creation is also a **whole** ("samt"- the network, the spiderweb). Is it the **work**, the **opus**? What's the **work**? Romans 8 already gave us some identification tags for it: adoption, redemption, freedom. **Especially freedom** and at the end of presentation, **redemption**. "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (8:21)

That's what Christ's resurrection bring to creation, to our spiderweb--freedom That's what Jesus means across the board, Says E. Kasemann when he entitles one of his books: **Jesus Means Freedom**. And Jesus means freedom by virtue of his resurrection. That sentence is the central theme in the proclamation coming from all three of our lectionary texts for this coming Sunday, Easter II.

Take the first lesson: Acts 5:12, 17-32: The apostles (en masse apparently) get thrown into jail by the powers that be in Jerusalem. "But at night an angel of the Lord **opened the prison doors and brought them out** and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." So they did, and they got arrested again, and got liberated again and again and again. Jesus' Easter gives his creatures freedom from the principalities and powers, their threats, our fears of them.

Or the second lesson: Rev. 1:4-18: "Grace and peace from...Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood." But his bleeding to death was not the last word about him, and thus he can announce to us: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one: I died; and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (v. 5,6,17,18) Resurrection brings to our creation-spiderweb something that was never there before: freedom from death and death's hegemony.

Or the third lesson, the day's Gospel, usually mis-labeled "the story of Doubting Thomas." [That's misleading on two counts. 1)Thomas doesn't doubt. He disbelieves. "I will not believe," are his own words. 2)And it's not just Thomas. That dis-belief is shared by all the disciples.] Witness the scenario. They are **all behind locked doors for fear** after the women proclaim Christ's Easter to them. For fear of what Jesus' executors might now do to them. Death, not the risen Christ, rules inside their locked-door quarters.

The resurrected Jesus then barges in to their "realm of death," [quote all of Franzmann's hymn, LBW 3961. When it is all over, disbelievers become believers and confessors: "You are my Lord [=owner] and my God." [Lord is a 1st article term.. "whose" creation it is.] And believing they have the Life that is in His name; and having that Life they are "sent" (out of their self-chosen lock-ups) "as the Father sent Jesus." The resurrected Christ brings **freedom from the fear of death**. And if there is no fear of death, death's power is broken.

Easter freedom has as many positive nuances as sin and death have negative ones. The N.T. begins its list of freedom's facets with the fundamental one: Freedom in our creaturely relationship with God (a place where moderns least expect it, or think that we need it) and after

an extended listing of freedoms it ends with cosmic freedom. That image, "cosmic freedom," comes from a Lutheran theologian under whom I studied in Germany. It may appear elsewhere in our tradition, but I do not know of it elsewhere. I shall read verbatim a few paragraphs from Werner Elert's ethics.

2. The dimensions of Easter Freedom.

Elert's section on freedom begins with a chronicle of what all the New Testament connects to that term:

". . . the freedom of faith, freedom of the Spirit, freedom from guilt, freedom from the law's jurisdiction, freedom from cultic regulations, freedom from sin and its dominion -- a multiplicity of freedoms, it seems. But that list is not yet complete. There is one more freedom which makes the apostle Paul groan—[Romans eight again]—as he envisions it. It is not yet present, but its very approach almost transports him into ecstasy. It is not yet here, for the children of God, along with the rest of creation, are still subject to decay, bound by suffering, lying in earthly chains, since they too must suffer travail along with the entire creation.

But this freedom will come and redeem those who wait for it, once more, in linkage with all creatures. Such freedom will bestow upon them all *doxa* (=glory), the genuine glow of the freedom of the children of God. It will not be a merely spiritual event, but also a bodily (somatic) event, since physical substance [embodiedness] is our common denominator with all other creatures (Rom. 8;18ff.). It will be total freedom, anthropological as well as cosmic, not a private affair just for the children of God, but an event arising from the collapse of the entire cosmos with all its' "rulers and authorities and powers" (1 Cor. 15:24), every one of which has oppressed, coerced, and dominated the powerless. This collapse of the cosmos is not the last and final cataclysm of nature, e.g. our sun burning out. It is instead the conclusion of Christ's battle with his adversaries, the cosmic powers that rule in darkness along with all the other forces of the cosmos, "whatever their names may be" (Eph. 1:21, 6:12; Col. 2:15).

It might appear that in this last paragraph we have gotten rather far away from the simple, transparent beginnings of our new ethos of freedom, namely, our encounter with Christ, the friend of sinners, and our master-disciple relationship with him. Nevertheless, such a cosmic expansion of expectations for freedom not only corresponds to the apocalyptic vision of the Son of Man himself as portrayed in the synoptic gospels (Mark 13; Matt. 24). It also turns our attention back once more to the full picture of the earthly Christ, who is the starting point for the entire apostolic witness. For us he is grace and truth in person by his befriending sinners and pardoning them. And his forgiveness is curiously and yet inseparably linked to his helping people in physical need (Matt. 9:2ff.). Human creatures are liberated from their own creaturely maladies.

When John the Baptist asks for his credentials, Jesus reminds him that not only is the good news being preached to the poor, but also that all sorts of illnesses are being healed and even the dead are raised (Luke 7:22). Whoever comes to him with a burden goes away unburdened (Matt.

11:28). Grace for him is not merely forgiveness. When he encounters pain, tears, hunger, anxiety, perplexity, or misery, he "is moved with compassion." He bears their grief and carries their sorrows. Even the pain of animals he links to human suffering (Luke 13:15; 14:5). Consequently, when he dies the whole creation mourns (Matt. 27:51; Luke 22:45). His resurrection breaches the massive cosmic wall that encircles us, thereby opening our view into a freedom where all cosmic restrictions and limits are gone.

There is thus a straight line from the friend of sinners to the one who sets the whole creation free, the triumphant Christ of Col. 2:15. This is the way his first, witnesses saw, believed and proclaimed him: the one who opposed not only sin, but also the princes of this world; the one who cleansed them not only from guilt, but also from leprosy; the one whom even the Roman empire, through the mouth of Pontius Pilate (John 19:1f.). had to acknowledge as king; the one who abolished death (2 Tim. 1:10); the one who "led captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8); a priest not according to legal requirements but by the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7:16); the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16); the one who "called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9); the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 26:18); the one who holds the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18); the one whose kingdom will have no end, as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

This is the Son of God who, when "he makes you free, you are free indeed" (John 8:36), and it is from him that the children of God await their total freedom, righteousness, sanctification, imperishability and immortality (1 Cor. 15:53; Eph. 6:24). All of these are freedoms from something: from guilt, from blemish, from decay, from death. They add up to be the total negation of all negations, the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:27). We cannot yet envision the whole picture, because "it does not yet appear what we shall be" (1 John 3:2)

Freedom itself, says Paul in Galatians, is the goal for which the risen Christ sets us free. Freedom itself is the end of the line. And what counts for us humans counts for co-creatures on the spiderweb. The end of the line coming from the empty tomb is cosmic freedom.

3. Co-creating Old and New Creation: "dedicating our lives to the care and redemption of all that you (God) have made."

One of the two options in the LBW for the offertory prayer in the regular eucharistic liturgy reads: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made." Those two words, care and redemption, designate the twin tasks on which the Risen Lord sends us "as the Father sent him." The two terms might appear to be synonyms, two words for the same thing, but they are not. To care for God's creation and to redeem it are distinct tasks.

Why does God's creation need to be cared for? If it's God's creation, why doesn't God care for it? The answer, of course, is that God does care for it, and we humans are the designated care-givers to make it happen. People are God's "field reps" for this task.

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, God appoints human beings as the care-givers for all that God has made. Even the unfractured creation of Genesis chapter one needs tender loving care. One signal of such care-giving world work is in that mysterious phrase used by God when creating the humans, "the image of God." If God is Creation's Care-Giver par excellence, caring enough to call it into existence and then not deserting it to run on its own, then people, we humans, are the ones designated to "image" that divine care to the world, to "mirror" God's own self when we interact with "all that you, God, have made." And, of course, that goes double for humans interacting with other humans, with other God-imagers.

But with that I have already jumped into the second creation account in Genesis chapters 2 & 3 where our primal parents have names and interact and where the story ends with tragedy. The business of mirroring God gets all mucked up. Adam and Eve get expelled from the created perfection of Eden. It seems that mirroring and care-giving go down the tubes.

That tragedy in the second creation account (Genesis 2 & 3) puts a second element into caring for God's creation. When care-giving is not automatic, then emergency measures are needed to make it happen at all. For the creation you and I know is itself now an endangered species. As Pogo said: "We have met (creation's) enemy and he is us." God's creation is fractured and in danger of even greater fracture. We are the culprits. In the world after Genesis 3, caring for creation is not just interacting with it to humanize it, to God-image it, but intervening for it to restrain the forces that demonize it, destroy it.

Preserve it, protect it, defend it, go to bat for it, speak up for it, be God's advocate for all that God has made--this is the rhetoric for caretakers "after the fall." And especially for our fellow human co-creatures is this true. "See to it that they get cared for, get justice, have their lives and welfare preserved," --that's the divine care-giving imperative in a fallen world. It puts care-givers in a conflictive situation, not unlike warfare. And it pits creation's care-givers against their fellow human beings. For the major threats to all that God has made, especially God's own created images, comes from other such images, people.

In our fallen world people do not automatically mirror God's TLC to fellow mirrors, but we mirror our own egos, our own predatory designs, our phony freedoms. Instead of "God loves you, and I'm on assignment to implement that," the almost automatic message is: "I love me, and I want you to implement that."

But how in a fallen creation can that work if the care-takers are also the creation's predators. How to rehabilitate tender loving care for the creation when what's needed is cure of the care-givers? Of course, to cure creation, the whole spiderweb, you have to undo Genesis 3. You need an Easter.

Martin Luther had a folksy way of portraying God's dilemma about creation after the fall. He pictures God deliberating: how to get creation cared for now that the God-mirrors were cracked? How to get sinners to care for creation even before the sinners themselves got cured?

Said Luther: God takes it as a given that humans are now ego-centric. So God devises a "plan B" after the fall to capitalize on that fact of sinner's self-centeredness and still keep creation from

total collapse. He inserts into all the structures of the fallen world the principle of reciprocity: "If you do good, you get rewarded. Do evil, and evil eventually gets done back to you." The common shorthand for this is the "golden rule." It makes sinners' self-interest the motive for their doing good to others.

So it's in a sinner's self-interest to be a care-taker, for that will bring positive feedback to one's own self. Thus even in a fallen world care-giving still gets done, seldom perfectly, but nevertheless enough, via these structures of reciprocity. More often than not care-giving happens, justice gets done, the "law of preservation" works to keep creation going.

That brings us to the second task after "care," viz., redemption, Paul's other big word in Romans. Creation longs for redemption, new ownership, its original ownership by God.

Care-giving under the rubrics of reciprocity doesn't cure ego-centrism, doesn't redeem God's creation. It is still victim to innumerable alien owners who usurp it as their own. There is at least one such alien owner per person in the billions of us that now inhabit the planet, to say nothing of the larger-than-life "principalities and powers" still running around loose. Redemption is the Biblical word for rectifying the ownership issue in creation.

So "redeem" is not just another synonym for "saving." To redeem is to buy back, to regain ownership. In today's Wall Street rhetoric it's a "take-over," but in this case not a "hostile takeover." Instead, a merciful one.

The term "kingdom of God" used so frequently in the first three Gospels is the "tag" Jesus and his disciples use for God's "merciful takeover" of the creation possessed by renegade and alien owners. The crucified and risen Jesus is the center of the operation. He's the Redeemer, the one who undoes the hostile takeover in Genesis 3.

And when Jesus' task was completed and he is closing out his affairs (see this coming Sunday's Gospel), he sends his disciples out with the self-same assignment: "As the Father sent me, so send I you, now on a second assignment—go and dedicate your life not only to the care, but also to the redemption of all that God has made." Any and every disciple—ordained or not—merely by virtue of being baptized, is called into the unfinished job of getting all the rest of creation back in under God's mercy-management.

Is that not a fundament accent for the folk called laity, really? Who else interacts with the creation, with all that God has made, on such a regular 24 hour a day basis? Who among Christians sees so much of what God has made that is still under alien ownerships, tyrannized and terrified by the competitors to God's proposed mercy-management model for running the world? The folks we call laity, of course. And the way to make such redemption happen is to insert mercy-management into the interactions we have with all that God has made—foremost in our interactions with the human creatures (for that is where it is the toughest to do) and then also in our interaction with the non-human creatures as well, the thousands of places each day where we encounter things besides people. If it doesn't happen there, it doesn't happen. And where God's Mercy-Management "in Christ" operates, there is freedom.

That may make it sound easy, and all of you know it is not. Yet that is the fundamental blueprint in the Christian tradition. Redemption is a second assignment that Jesus-followers take on in addition to the care-taker assignment that applies to all humans created in the image of God. Redemption means freedom. When creation, even just the small patch of webbing that each of us touches, gets redeemed, there is freedom.

When we Christians pray: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are asking for just this, asking that the “mercy” on which heaven runs (by definition) would also be the power that energizes everything on earth, i.e., in creation. Not only do we pray for it in this third petition of “Our Owner’s Prayer,” but merely by reciting the petition we “dedicate our lives” to make it concrete in and around our individual locations on the creation-spiderweb.

The cross of Jesus and his resurrection is the secret for freedom anywhere and everywhere in creation. The first act of the drama ran from Bethlehem to the empty tomb. Here is the octave of Easter 1992, on the eve of Easter II, we are on stage right now. The drama still bears the same title: “care and redemption of all that you [God] have made.” The assignment is still to get Easter’s freedom operational in all the places in creation where it is not yet so. That’s Easter. That’s ministry. That’s why we are gathered here today. For Easter people and for a cosmos that longs for its own eastering, there really is no alternative.