

A Quilted World:

A Community Based Analysis of the Interconnectedness of God’s Creation, and how it Informs our Response to Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

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Introduction:

As we go about our lives every day, it is impossible to ignore the beauty and sanctity of God’s creation around us. However, this natural world is increasingly under threat due to human caused acts such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, and overfishing. This degradation, in part due to our anthropocentric view of scripture and nature, means a theological argument in favor of environmental action is more necessary than ever. This poster seeks to explain the origins of some of these anthropocentric views and how they have impacted both the environment and eco-theology. In addition, it argues that the entire Earth, including humans, other creatures, and nonliving parts of creation, form a community united in **four aspects**: our creation, God’s love for us, our praise of God, and our common suffering. Finally, the poster will conclude with the theological implications of our world being a community, and how our understanding of community helps inform our response to environmental degradation from a theological perspective.

In addition to scripture and theological analysis, this poster uses a mixture of artistic works to demonstrate the ideas of community, and how many of the concepts to be discussed are already present in pop culture. The main artistic piece this poster delves into is a quilt I created. A quilt is the perfect representation of Earth’ being a community - The inherent nature of a quilt – different pieces of fabric, of different shapes and sizes, all coming together to form one quilt – lends itself perfectly to portraying a community.

Anthropocentrism:

According to theologian Elizabeth Johnson Misinterpreted Scripture and the Christian doctrine of dominance lead to “unbridled exploitation of nature without protest,” as well as White European enslavement of indigenous peoples. One example of an often misinterpreted scripture is:

Genesis 1:28

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

The idea that being created in God’s image means we have absolute dominion over other creatures is incorrect. In Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*, he argues that this interpretation is wrong – dominion means responsibly taking care of and preserving nature. In addition, anthropocentrism is also responsible for a lack of theological discussion on the topic of the natural world as a community.



In Pop Culture – Michael Jackson’s “Earth Song” depicts the aforementioned anthropocentric view of nature. The music video initially starts out with a lush jungle, which is quickly bulldozed, giving way to a barren, fiery wasteland. Similar scenes of deforestation and elephants being poached for their ivory also play during the song, which features the chorus “Did you ever stop to notice, All the blood we’ve shed before, Did you ever stop to notice, This crying Earth, these weeping shores.”

One Community - Earth:

Within my quilt, pieces of plastic bags are sewn into the quilt to symbolize the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and brown buttons and patches amidst a sea of green show deforestation in our world’s largest rainforests (as rainforests are known as the world’s lungs, these patches are shaped like the organ). The north and south pole are depicted as cracking and melting to represent some of the effects of climate change. Within just the U.S. on the quilt, black buttons in the Gulf of Mexico represent the BP oil spill in 2010, and orange fabric on the west coast represent the forests fires that destroyed homes and habitats throughout California. How are all of these seemingly separate incidents of environmental destruction related with each other and with us? How do we form a sense of community with other living beings? Within the quilt, thread and stitches are what literally bind every aspect of nature together (including natural disasters and non living things), serving as the core foundation of this quilted “Earthen” community.

These stitches are symbolic of the theological ways in which we are actually united with all of God’s creation:

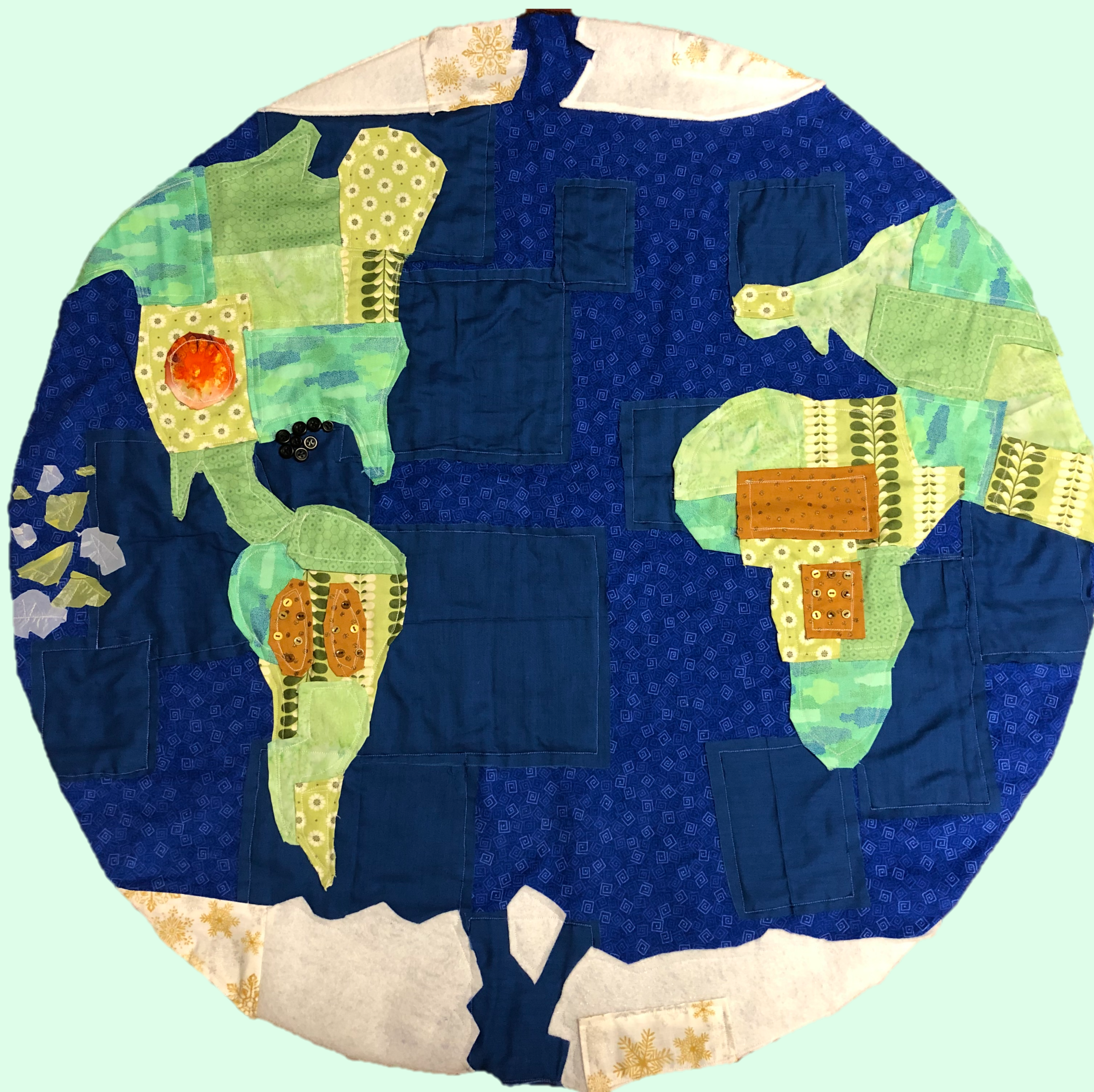
- *Our creation*
- *God’s love for us*
- *Our praise of God*
- *Our common suffering*



2010 B.P. Oil Spill



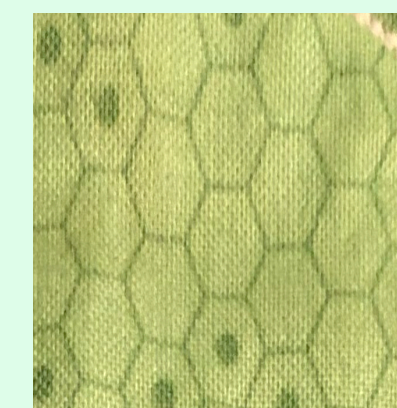
2018 California Wildfires



Ways Earth is a Community:

Our Creation - The main way in which we form a community with other living and nonliving beings is through our creation. Elizabeth Johnson explains “The theological basis of kinship between all species on this planet is the relationship of all of us to the one God who creates and saves. All creatures come from the hand of the one gracious god, are held in existence by the same vivifying giver of life, and at the end all will be gathered into a new heaven and a new Earth by the same ineffable God.” Humans, creatures, and even habitats were all formed by God, and us such our existence is an inherent source of unity.

Another interesting argument that Johnson has is that through Jesus Christ, in whom the Word became flesh, the evolutionary story of Earth’s life is joined with God, meaning “the word of God became DNA” (Johnson). This idea could be taken to mean that God can be found within the basic building blocks of all life (DNA/Cells), and is depicted in a pattern of my quilt that depicts cells, which are found in all living organisms.



Julian of Norwich’s discussion of creation in “Revelations of Divine Love” is also relevant: “When God was going to make man’s body, he took the slime of the earth, which is a substance mixed and gathered from all bodily things, and from this he made man’s body; but for the making of man’s soul he did not wish to take anything at all, he simply made it. And so created nature is justly united to the creator, who is essential uncreated nature, that is, God”(129) - Although the first part of the passage refers specifically to man, her more inclusive reference of “created nature,” as well as the anthropocentric views of her time period allow for us to expand mankind in this context .

God’s Love for us - Divine love is a similarly powerful binding force amongst all of God’s creation, reaching all of his work. One example of this principle in scripture can be found in the book of Psalms, which explains God’s relationship with his creation:

Psalms 145

“The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.... The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made”

This passage provides support for including nonliving parts of creation in our Earthen community – God is loving towards *all* he mad, including features such as rocks, rivers, and mountains. Julian of Norwich also provides support for the idea of community based on love: “Before he made us he loved us, and when we were made we loved him; and this is a love made of the essential goodness natural to the Holy Ghost ... Thus, man’s soul is made of God and bound to God by the same ties” (129). While this passage again solely refers to mankind, these principles of divine love apply to all of God’s creation.

Our praise of God - The third uniting source of community among all living things is our collective praise of God. While it is clear through Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book “Life Together,” that human praise and prayer is a way in which to maintain and develop Christian community, it is not immediately obvious as to how this could apply to animals or plants. As they do not share the same form of conscious or verbalization as humans, how can they express praise? This is an incorrect assumption, as Elizabeth Johnson explains, “Animal praise points to the truth that animals have their own relationship to God and respond with their lives to the creator who has cared for them.” There is also biblical basis for animal praise:

Psalms 148

“Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens”

In Pop Culture – One work that demonstrates animal praise is the “Circle of Life” scene from the *Lion King*. Within the scene, baby Simba could be seen as a Christ like figure similar to baby Jesus – the ray of light that descends upon him seems to confirm this. Species from the entire animal kingdom gather around Simba, making what appear to be joyous noises, and then proceed to bow down as Simba is held high for all to see. Thus, this scene could be seen as symbolic of animal praise of God and their reverence towards his kingdom



Our Collective Suffering - The final way in which we form a community with God’s creation is through our collective suffering. The quilt demonstrates this idea: the environmental disasters are sewn on, and as such are just as much a part of the quilt as the land and rest of Earth. The theological basis of this aspect of community is in Jesus’ suffering on the cross. As Bonhoeffer explains, “God truly suffered and endured human beings in the body of Jesus Christ. But in so doing, God bore them as a mother carries her child, as a shepherd the lost lamb. God took on human nature. Then, human beings crushed God to the ground. But God stayed with them and they with God. In suffering and enduring human beings, God maintained community with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the cross. Christians share in this law” (Bonhoeffer 78). As long as life continues to suffer and endure under the pressures of ecological disaster, God will maintain community with us. This suffering can also apply to the physical aspects of nature: melting glaciers, deforestation, etc. Bonhoeffer’s use of language serves as a reminder for how to deal with suffering communities: *care*. God is described as shepherding and nurturing those suffering, and so we must do the same for a suffering creation.



In Pop Culture – A scene from Netflix’s documentary “Our Planet” shows a community of over a hundred thousand walrus, forced to reside on a crowded stretch of shoreline. Just as the quilt depicts, their habitat is melting due to climate change. They are so tightly packed that they are often crushed to death. In addition, the documentary depicts a heartbreaking scene of walrus falling off of cliffs: they climb to find unoccupied space, and with their poor vision fall to their death. These walrus are not just a community in terms of their location and their extremely close quarters, but as a group that is collectively suffering due to climate change.

Response to Climate Change :

We can use several of Bonhoeffer’s principles to inform our actions on preserving the environment., Bonhoeffer explains that the “The first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them” (75). For too long in our history we have ignored the cries of animals and our environment calling us to act, and the first step is acknowledging that we must “listen” to these calls. Animals and the Earth do not speak or verbalize in the same way we do, but do so in other ways. This idea of a crying Earth, and our ignorance of these cries is referenced in Jackson’s Earth Song: “Did you ever stop to notice, This crying Earth, these weeping shores.” The Walrus are another example: if falling off cliffs is not a cry for help, then what is?! Natural disasters themselves could serve as Earth crying out for help – tragic events such as mud slides, forest fires, and glacier melt are exacerbated by climate change, and their more frequent occurrences also serve as a cry for help. Thus, the first step in combatting these problems is for everyone in our Earthen community, particularly heads of large corporations and government officials, to listen to these cries.

In addition to listening, Bonhoeffer explains that communities must perform “active helpfulness,” which is followed by a discussion of the service of helping one another: “The law of Christ is a law of forbearance. Forbearance means enduring and suffering. The other person is a burden to the Christian, in fact for the Christian most of all ... They must suffer and endure one another, Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled” (Bonhoeffer 77). As a community through God’s multiple interactions with us, we must begin to look at environmental disasters as impacting all of us. It is only after we acknowledge and take up this burden that the human community will be able to see living creatures and the natural world not as “an object to be controlled” and exploited, but rather as kin in a loving, united community that must be cared for and protected.