Ecclesiastes for the ecclesia

A wisdom ecclesiology embraces the church’s earthly context—but without romanticizing it.

by Amy Plantinga Pauw in the August 2, 2017 issue

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There has been no Copernican revolution in ecclesiology. It seems that theologians are still working with a geocentric universe when they talk about church, even as the world that scientists tell us about keeps getting vaster and vaster. Human members of Christ’s body are biologically and genetically part of the earth community, and part of the task of a wisdom ecclesiology is to insist that Christian communities of faith truly belong to the earth. Yet it is also appropriate for an ecclesiology that takes creation seriously to take a step back and consider our unimaginably bigger cosmic context as God’s creatures.

The current scientific consensus is that we live in an expanding universe, a galaxy-filled space that began some 13.8 billion years ago with the Big Bang. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, is an enormous system of stars, of which our sun is a single,

rather insignificant member. We earthlings inhabit the third planet from the sun in our tiny solar system. Biological life on earth began approximately 3.5 billion years ago, roughly 10 billion years after the Big Bang. The hominid ancestor that we have in common with chimpanzees did not emerge until only about 6 or 7 million years ago, and anatomically modern humans emerged in Africa roughly 200,000 years ago. Human beings take their place, alongside millions of other species, as latecomers to life on earth.

Astrophysicist and science communicator Neil deGrasse Tyson has dramatized the brevity of human existence within this larger cosmic story by laying out the whole history of the universe to this point over a one-year calendar. By prorating 13.8 billion years across an imaginary 12 months, deGrasse Tyson's "cosmic calendar" shows that all of what we think of as human history takes place in the last minute, of the last hour, of the last day of the universe. As biologist Francis Collins observes, "God writes such short stories about humankind."

Christians confess that God is the Creator of all planets and stars and galaxies, even of universes beyond our ability to perceive or imagine. Yet Christian theology has often shrunk this enormous cosmic story down to a minute human story. Emil Brunner is not the first Christian theologian to conclude that "the cosmic element in the Bible is never anything more than the scenery in which the history of mankind takes place."

This is a drastic misreading of a biblical story that stretches from creation to new creation. William Brown insists that the "world that God so loved in John 3:16 is nothing less than cosmic." God's creative activity and purposes extend far beyond human history, and even farther beyond the tiny part of human history called church. Narratives of exceptionalism come easily for Christian communities of faith. Acknowledging the theologically significant history of the nonhuman creation creates space for church simply to rest in its shared creaturehood.

The dynamic, unfathomable universe of which we are a minute part will not last forever. Scientists are confident that at some point our sun will exhaust its supply of fuel, making biological life on earth impossible. Life on our small planet is thus a living toward death, which is true for both all the creatures of earth and for the earth itself. To borrow an image from Ecclesiastes, all creaturely days under the sun come to an end, and so eventually does the sun itself. Scientists predict that the universe as a whole will at some point collapse into itself (the so-called cosmic crunch) or

dissipate its energy via an increasing rate of expansion. The cosmos, despite its staggering immensity of both time and space, is finite.

Where does this grand and sobering cosmic picture leave communities of Christian faith? It reminds us of the vastness and complexity of God's creation, and of our minuscule role in it. God writes such short stories about church! Creaturely life will continue long after the human species is gone. Contra Brunner, the cosmos is never merely "the scenery" for the human story or the Christian story. Nor is it appropriate to declare the humanization of the cosmos as its God-given destiny. We can rejoice in God's gifts and trust in God's promises to us without pretending to understand the whole of God's work and ways, much less assuming that we are at the center of it all. Like Job's stammering before God's cosmic questions, we will never comprehend the scope of God's creative activity.

The larger cosmic picture also reinforces how rare and ephemeral biological life is. Earthly communities of Christian faith exist as a blink of an eye in the cosmic history of the universe. Like the other occupants of the earth, "we are made from the ashes of dead stars" (to quote theologian Ernst Conradie), existing in utter dependence on an intricate network of matter and energy that makes our earthly life possible. We did not put this framework in place, and we cannot change the fact that it will eventually give out.

In her poem "Brute Fact," Vassar Miller wrestles with what it means to embrace the fleetingness of life.

> We love a face, a body
> not for perfection of feature
> or color or line, but simply
> because they vanish.

Earthly life is cherished not because it is perfect but because it is a precious, time-bound gift. To be creaturely is to learn to love what is beyond our ability to possess and control. For the earthly church, the only appropriate response to this radical contingency is creaturely awe and gratitude—and a commitment to the flourishing of our earthly home.

Humility has been a dangerous virtue in Christian traditions, often and easily misused. Yet humility is called for here. A proper Christian humility takes its cue

from the word's etymology and grounds us more firmly in *humus*, the soil of the earth. Humility is a fitting virtue for us earthlings: unpretentious, unpresumptuous—yet unapologetic—because it is strongly rooted in the identity God has given us and called us to. Whether and however God hosts creaturely life elsewhere, we are to give thanks for our own finite, contingent, interdependent life on earth. Our understandings of church should be *earthy*, rooted in and attuned to the patterns and cycles, the vulnerabilities and resilience, of our planet. For all its struggle and heartbreak, the creaturehood of church, like that of the creation as a whole, is sheer divine gift.

From this gratitude emerges an ecological ethic. Christians are to try to live their faith as what Larry Rasmussen calls an "Earth faith." For Rasmussen, this involves "a sense of place, a sense of community, rites and responsibilities appropriate to integral human-earth relations, an insistence that the spiritual and material are inextricable dimensions of the same reality, an awareness of the divine presence as a presence experienced in all the powers that bear upon us" (from "Sightings of Primal Visions: Community and Ecology," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by William P. Brown).

A wisdom ecclesiology calls church to repent of its indifference to earthly suffering and oppression, its selfish plundering of the earth's resources, its refusal to accept the limits of its creaturehood. The earthly church witnesses to and participates in something much bigger than itself, a giftedness and hope that far exceed its own vision and understanding.

Yet a wisdom ecclesiology also resists the temptation to romanticize our earthly context. Biological life on earth is inescapably a place of suffering and death: present life is sustained and new life emerges only through the death of other creatures. Conradie notes that "evolution through natural selection has uncovered regions of terror and torture unknown to us before." This raises profound theological questions about what it means to call creation good. Theologian John Haught asks: "How could a lovingly concerned God tolerate the struggle, pain, cruelty, brutality, and death which lie beneath the relatively stable and serene surface of nature's present order?" There is a creaturely ontology of violence that the earthly church is ineluctably part of, and this means that there is a persistently tragic dimension to church's creaturely life.

Church in ordinary time both embraces bodily life and its connectedness to all living things and at the same time grieves and laments the “terror and torture” endemic to earthly existence. Earthly life for Christians is marked by the biblical tension between being aliens (1 Pet. 2:11) and residents (Jer. 29:4–7) in the world God has made. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes clear, this is not a tension between being otherworldly and this-worldly. Both alien and resident are communal modes of “belonging wholly to the world” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*). Like the figure of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, church appears in the thick of human life, in the daily routines and struggles of ordinary people. “The church stands,” Bonhoeffer insists, “not at the point where human powers fail, at the boundaries, but in the center of the village.”

The church lives gratefully on borrowed time, nurturing an earthly life.

As resident, church claims its God-given freedom to live and act as God’s creature, making common cause with God’s other creatures. Sometimes the imperatives of the gospel require church to join hands with others. But Christian life is not only about gospel imperatives. The ordinary rhythms of eating and resting, working and playing, are not to be scorned, nor held up to continual suspicion—as if communities of Christian faith always had more urgent and noble duties to perform.

Bonhoeffer mocks those who act “as if human beings incessantly had to do something decisive, fulfill a higher purpose, meet an ultimate duty.” This represents, he says, “a misjudgment of historical human existence in which everything has its time (Eccles. 3)—eating, drinking, sleeping, as well as conscious decision making and acting, working and resting, serving a purpose and just being without purpose” (*Ethics*). For the resident church, the ordinary joys of personal and communal bodily life are an end in themselves and not to be disdained or always subordinated to some “higher” spiritual purpose.

Ecclesiastes repeatedly portrays the futility of a radically purpose-driven life, and this Wisdom book can help Christian communities of faith avoid instrumentalist understandings of their creaturehood. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 3, Bonhoeffer says: “We should find and love God in what God directly gives us; if it pleases God to allow us to enjoy an overwhelming earthly happiness, then [we] shouldn’t be more pious than God and allow our happiness to be gnawed away through arrogant thoughts and challenges and wild religious fantasy that is never satisfied with what God gives” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*). Whether this earthly happiness is found

in an evening of beautiful music, or the success of an adult literacy program, or the bounty of a church vegetable garden, Christians should receive it as God's gift. To be hankering after spiritual ecstasies in the face of God's generous provisions for earthly life is not God's will.

However, the violence and suffering endemic to earthly life also alienate church from its own creaturely existence. The goodness and coherence of the created world do not translate into its safety or predictability for creaturely life. There is a randomness and complexity in the interplay of natural forces that make suffering inevitable. Creaturely life within such a world poses inherent and unavoidable risk, and the categories of sin and its consequences will rarely be adequate to make sense of creaturely suffering. As I have noted above, the earthly church also suffers because of sin, both its own and that of others. The vulnerability and limitations of creaturehood are not the source of sin in church life, though they can multiply the damage that human sin inflicts. Burdened by both sin and creaturely suffering, church lives as alien.

As alien, church rejects what Bonhoeffer calls in his meditation on Psalm 119 "a very godless homesickness for the other world" that would distance it from this world's problems. Our lot is to live as earthly sojourners and strangers, and thus to answer "God's call into this world of strangers." Church is not to be indifferent to the earth's sorrows and joys; rather, it is to work hard and wait patiently for God's promised redemption. Resisting the temptations to escape to an otherworldly fantasy or to retreat to sheltered Christian enclaves, Christians should "remain in step with God" in the world, not "rushing a few steps ahead" to some vision of the consummation of God's reign. Precisely when the world feels least like home, church is to embrace it and remain in solidarity with it. As Bonhoeffer insists, followers of Jesus Christ need to spurn "the devious trick of being religious, yes even 'Christian,' at the expense of the earth."

The alien church lives in a world fractured by sin and suffering. It groans with creation for deliverance. Ecological, political, and economic problems are Christian problems, problems in which church has a stake. In faithfulness to the earth that nourishes its life, communities of Christian faith must respond. Yet the suffering and perishing endemic to earthly life will not be fully overcome by Christian efforts. "Things hoped for and reached after," Deotis Roberts observes, "always elude complete fulfillment. . . . Indeed, a Christian dies reaching" (*Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*). In the meantime, the earthly church exists in

God’s creative providence—and claims its identity there. It does not pretend to know the day or hour of the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purposes, much less their precise contours. For now, church gives thanks for its planetary home and strives for its own earthly flourishing and that of its fellow creatures.

Bonhoeffer says that “only when one loves life and the earth so much that with it everything seems to be lost and at its end may one believe in the resurrection of the dead and a new world” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*). Christians are to claim the deep earthiness of their faith and identity, acknowledging its tragic dimensions. Without this, all our bearings for knowing ourselves and God disappear. Yet as Bonhoeffer’s comment about resurrection and a new world make clear, earth is church’s proximate context, not its ultimate context. The Christian attachment to earth is deep and abiding, but it is not absolute.

Communities of faith are a blink of an eye in the history of the universe.

Christian existence is “eccentric” existence, finding its center, not in itself or in any other creaturely reality, but in God. On one hand, God’s grace makes it possible for church to call the earth home; on the other hand, church knows that its final home is found only in God (Phil. 3:20). Eternal life for earth’s creatures is life in God.

Future-oriented eschatologies such as in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Coming of God* seek to resolve this tension by absolutizing the proximate context of the earth. In the fullness of God’s promised reign, “the earth becomes the city which holds paradise within itself.” Moltmann disputes the current scientific portrait of the eventual end of the cosmos, claiming God’s power over the future to bring into being “a cosmic new creation of all things and conditions.” In his eschatological vision, the present earth will finally be transformed into an everlasting world in which there will be no death, suffering, or loss. The new heavens and earth become the site of “the immediate, omnipresent and eternal indwelling of God and of Christ.” For Moltmann, the Christian hope is that our proximate context on earth and our ultimate context in God eventually coincide.

By contrast, the wisdom ecclesiology that I am developing here does not understand commitment to bodily, earthly life now as dependent on the future hope for a perfect, imperishable re-creation of earthly life. Earthly life is a great but not a final gift. Christian faith does not require that the fate of our little planet be somehow wrenched out of the rhythms of the immense cosmos God has created. By God’s

grace, church has been given earthly space and time for living out its faith. The promise of life without suffering, pain, or death on a re-created planet earth is not required to embrace earthly life here and now. If scientists are correct, the earth and heaven we know will one day pass away. But the promises for everlasting life with God do not pass away (Matt. 24:35).

This posture of living gratefully on borrowed time—within the limits, compromises, and failures of human creaturehood—nurtures an earthly life marked by both hope and longing, rejoicing and grieving. The resurrection God promises is on the other side of death: our death and maybe even our planet's death. In the meantime, there is a gratitude for earthly life, alongside an honest recognition of its fallibility and limits. Amidst the expectation that death will come, both for individual creatures and eventually for the planet, Christians rest in the hope that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38–39).

For almost two thousand years, Christians have been wondering when the end will come. Of course, for the Creator of all, "one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). To remain in step with God through millennia of ordinary time requires trust that "the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness" (2 Pet. 3:9). The expanse of ordinary time is instead an expression of divine patience with our slow progress in the curriculum of the Spirit. God has gifts that we are not ready to receive. In the meantime, we are to embrace with joy the gifts that are ours now, as they come to us from God's hand (Eccles. 5:18–20). From a cosmic perspective, the span of church's existence is "like a drop of water from the sea" (Sir. 18:10). But from the perspective of our human finitude, God's gift of time stretches out over years, centuries, and millennia, generation upon generation. Church lives within the human scale of this ordinary time, giving thanks for the space it provides to learn, grow, and hope in God's future.

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