

Trinity Institute, *The Good News Now – Evolving with the Gospel of Jesus*

Thank you, Bob. Good morning, everyone.

(Chorus of good morning)

I, too, feel a great pleasure in being invited to be part of this Institute this year. I love the natural world, and find the beauty of nature and the evolutionary life story of animals and plants to be awesome. We live in a time of ecological distress, when sinful human action is ruining the fabric of life on this planet. These two factors have led me in recent years to want to include all creation in the way I think about faith and live it in prayer and practice.

I would like to think a kind of theology that makes love of the natural world intrinsic to our faith in God. Hence, when I heard the theme of this year's Institute I asked myself what is the good news of the cross for all creation? What is the good news of the cross for creatures who do not sin, but die? This question taps into the biblical theme of cosmic redemption greatly neglected in the Western tradition. The early Christian hymn in Colossians Chapter One opens a door to my reflection. It names the crucified and risen Jesus, the first born of all creation, and also the first born of the dead, and it ends with the significantly inclusive vision. Through him, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross.

Very seldom noticed, the next verse encourages the Colossians to remain steadfast in the faith "without shifting from the hope promised by the Gospel you have heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:23). The Gospel proclaimed to every creature under heaven. It is not often that the church attends to this. But the good news of the cross is not meant only for humans. Let us think about this, starting with the natural world itself.

As you know, the theory of evolution holds that the whole dizzying beautiful array of life that covers this planet, plants, animals, and humans included, emerged gradually, developing over hundreds of millions of years from monocellular creatures in the ancient seas. Some well-adapted species advanced, smiled upon by natural selection. Many others eventually petered out and went extinct. The result, to use Darwin's fertile metaphor, is that life on earth can be pictured as a great tree. Imagine a spreading evolutionary tree that links all living creatures into one community spanning the ages. The outer layer of budding twigs and green leaves represents the multitudes of species alive today topping out in the sun. Below are layers of dead and broken branches that once were alive, but now support others to which they have given rise.

This image underscores the profound reality that all organic beings are related to one

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

another. We are bonded into one community of life by a common history of descent, by shared genes, and by a dynamic ongoing presence of ecological exchange. Note that death is a companion across this entire evolutionary adventure. Despite death's tragic nature for the individual, it may bring certain benefit. Animals eat one another. In the process, the nutrients in the life stream of one organism become a resource that nourishes the life of the other. Also, the struggle to escape death brings about rich changes in structure and behavior. The cheetah's tooth has carved the legs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice-versa. Furthermore, with death there opens up space for new creatures to emerge. Without death, eventually there would be no more room for evolution to occur.

So death arose originally not as a result of sin, but as an essential element in a tremendously powerful process that created and continues to create this magnificent community of life on our planet. And yet, the case of the back-up pelican chick, increasingly used in theological discussion, brings this aspect of evolution to a head in riveting and poignant terms. Here's the situation. Females of the species, called white pelicans, ordinarily lay two eggs several days apart. The first chick to hatch eats, grows larger, and becomes feisty. When the second hatches, the firstborn tends to act aggressively toward it, grabbing the food from the parents' pouch first, and often nudging the smaller bird out of the nest. There, ignored by its parents, the younger chick normally suffers starvation and dies, despite its struggle to rejoin the family.

Now, before this dénouement, there is a window of opportunity in which should some crisis befall the older chick, pelican parents can still raise the second offspring, and, thereby, have a successful breeding season. It may also happen that in an especially good year, the parents will feed and raise both chicks, but ordinarily, the second chick has only a ten percent chance of surviving. It is born as insurance.

Now for the white pelicans as a species, this has been a successful evolutionary strategy, enabling their kind to survive for 30 million years. As depicted on video and shown on public television, however, the ostracized chicks, pinch-faced, small cries, and desperate attempts to regain the nest, and its final collapse from weakness to become food for the gulls is a scene of such distress, as to call for an account of this suffering in a world that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions consider a good creation. The more so, as the anguish of this one little creature is continuously repeated on a grand scale.

Now let the pelican chick stand for all the creatures on the tree of life who have suffered and died. Billions of creatures over millions of years, many with nervous systems that knew pain, and brains that suffer fear, and terror, and grief. What can be said in a faith perspective? The most fundamental move we can make, I think, is to

affirm the presence of God in the midst of this shocking enormity of death. The theology of creation teaches that this spirit of God, the creator spirit, indwells the world, empowering its life. This same spirit of God, I suggest, abides amid the agony and the loss. God, who is love, is there, in compassionate solidarity with the creatures, shot through with pain, and finished off by death, there, in that God-forsaken moment, as only the giver of life can be, with the promise of something more. In daring to think this way, Christian theology draws on a peculiar source of insight all its own, namely the Gospel story of Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection.

What might this have to do with the pelican chick, let alone all the suffering creatures and extinct species? I suggest there is a clue lying in plain site, namely the reality of the flesh. Christians hold to the radical notion that the one transcending God, who creates and empowers the world, freely chose to save this world not as a kindly onlooker from afar, but by personally joining this world and suffering its death. The prologue of John's Gospel states this succinctly, speaking of the advent of Jesus as the coming of God's personal self-expressing word, full of loving kindness and faithfulness, and the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Note that the Gospel does not say that the Word became a human being. In Greek, that would be *Anthropos*. Not that the Word became man. In Greek, that would be *aner*. But flesh, *sarx*, in Greek, a broader reality. Now *sarx*, or flesh, in the New Testament, connotes the finite quality of the material world, which is fragile, vulnerable, prone to sin and trouble, perishable. Taking the powerful theme of God's dwelling among the people of Israel a step further, John's Gospel affirms that in a new and saving event, the Word of God became flesh, entered personally into this sphere of what is perishable, to shed light on all from within.

Now in truth, the configuration of *sarx*, that the word became, was precisely human. However, the theory of evolution makes clear that *Homo sapiens* does not stand alone. We are intrinsically related to all of the species in the evolutionary network of life. Darwin has a great quote on this in the origin of species, which I would like to quote. "What can be more curious than that the hand of a man formed for grasping, that of a mole for digging, the leg of a horse, the paddle of the porpoise, and the wing of the bat should all be construed on the same pattern, and should include the same bones in the same relative position. On the ordinary view of the direct creation of each being, we can only say it has so pleased the Creator to construct each animal this way. But if we suppose that an ancient progenitor had its limbs arranged this way, then all descendants inherited the pattern. The bones might be enveloped in thick membrane to form a paddle to swim, or a thin membrane to form a wing, or they may be lengthened or shortened for some profitable purpose, but there will be no tendency to alter the framework. Indeed, the same names are given to the same bones in widely different animals. What a grand natural system,

formed by dissent, with slow and successive modifications.”

Indeed, our human flesh, our persons, embodied persons, is intrinsically related to the flesh of all other living creatures. In view of this community of life, the Danish theologian, Niels Gregersen, has coined the phrase “Deep Incarnation,” and it is starting to be used in theology to signify the radical reach of incarnation all the way down into the very tissue of biological existence itself. Deep incarnation understands John’s Gospel to be saying that the *sarx*, the flesh, which the word became, connects Jesus not only with all other human beings, but also with the whole world of living creatures.

Now with this framework in place, watch what happens when we consider the cross. Christian belief has always held that Jesus’ agonizing death discloses the compassionate nature of divine love that suffers the fate of human beings in order to redeem. However this is explained, is this loving solidarity with human beings limited to our own kind, or does it extend to the whole community of life of which human beings are but a part? All creatures come to an end. Those with nervous systems know pain and suffering. Deep incarnation holds that in Christ the mystery of God reaches into the roots of material and biological existence, including its perishing.

Hence, there is strong warrant for extending God’s compassion to embrace the groan of suffering and the silence of death of all creatures who are not abandoned in their distress. Thus connected to the natural world, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God’s redemptive love, suffering in solidarity with all creatures living and dying through endless millennia of evolution, from the extinction of species, to every sparrow that falls to the ground. It is as if by inhabiting the inside of the isolating shell of death that Christ crucified brings divine life into closest contact with this disaster, setting up a gleam of light for all others who suffer this darkness.

One may well ask if this kind of presence of the living God with creatures in their suffering makes any difference. In one sense, it does not. Wrestling intensely with this problem, British theologian Christopher Southgate admits as much. Death, he says, goes on as before, destroying the individual, but even then, he reflects, we need to realize that God’s merciful presence is just that, presence of the most profoundly attentive and loving sort, a solidarity that at some deep level takes away the aloneness of the suffering creature’s experience. The indwelling, empowering spirit of God, the spirit of the crucified Christ, who companions creatures in their individual lives and long-range evolution, does not abandon them in the moment of trial. The cross gives warrant for locating the compassion of God right at the center of their affliction. The tree of the cross, we might say, pervades the tree of life with the presence of divine love. The pelican chick does not die alone.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

One more element completes this story. The Easter message proclaims that what a way to Jesus in death was not ultimate annihilation, but a homecoming into God's mystery. For Jesus personally, this means the abiding redeemed validity of his historical human existence in God's presence forever. The hallelujahs that break out at Easter, however, are based on more than our joy for Jesus' personal good fortune. I mean we're glad for him, right, but we sing hallelujah because we know that Christ's destiny is not meant for himself alone, meant for the whole human race. As first born of the dead, his final destiny awaits all humans who go down into the grave, pending judgment.

Does this have any meaning for the natural world of life? The logic of deep incarnation would say yes. Christ's resurrection grounds hope for a blessed future, not only for humans, but for the whole community of creation. And the reasoning runs like this. This person, Jesus of Nazareth, was composed of star stuff and earth stuff. He was a genuine part of the biological community of earth, existing in a network of exchange with his ecological environment. If, in death, a piece of this world, real to the core, as Carl Rahner writes, surrendered his life in love, and is now forever with God in glory, then this signals in embryo the final beginning of the redemptive glorification, not just for human beings alone, but for all flesh, all material beings, every creature that passes through death. The evolving world of life will not be left behind, but will be transfigured in the same resurrecting action of the creative spirit that brought Christ to life. Thus, the resurrection marks the beginning of the redemption of the whole physical cosmos. With this realization, Ambrose of Milan could preach in the fourth century, in Christ's resurrection, the earth itself arose.

Now this would not be the case if the resurrection marked simply the spiritual survival of Jesus' soul after death, but having gone down into the darkness of death, he was raised from the dead as a whole historical person. What this means in the concrete is not seriously imaginable to us, who still live within the time space grid of our known universe. It certainly does not mean that Jesus' corpse was resuscitated to resume life in our present state of biological existence along the lines of the Lazarus story. Such naïve physicality, presented in stained glass windows and Easter cards, pervades popular thinking, but it does not bear up under critical scrutiny; yet, the resurrection of the crucified does have much to do with physicality. The empty tomb stands as a historical marker for the love of God, stronger than death, which can act with a power that transfigures biological existence itself.

The liturgy of the Easter Vigil in many churches celebrates this hope with the unique hymn, "The Exsultet," sung only once a year on this night. In the light of the newly lit Easter candle, whose light represents the risen Christ, this hymn begins, "Exult all

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

creation around God's throne, for Jesus Christ is risen," and it continues, "Rejoice, oh, Earth, in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your king. Christ has conquered, glory fills you, darkness vanishes forever."

The moment of this song passes quickly, but it is stunning. At the most magnificent liturgy of the year, the church is singing to the earth. It and its creatures, too, need to hear the good news, because the risen Christ embodies the ultimate hope of all creation, including them. The final transformation of history will be the salvation of everything, including the groaning community of life on earth, even the pelican chick, brought into communion with the loving power of the God of life. I think we could say Christ is the first born of all the dead of Darwin's tree of life.

I conclude with another telling metaphor well known to this audience that connects the cross with the natural world. In one of her revelations about the courteous love of God, Julian of Norwich contemplates Christ crucified, singing his sacrifice as a sign of his love. "Everything which is good and comforting for our help flows from this love. It is like clothing which wraps and unfolds us, embraces and shelters us, surrounds, and never deserts us." Her vision of this love's embrace then expands beyond human beings to encompass all the world. "And in this, he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. And I looked at it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What can this be?' I was amazed that it could last, because I thought because of its littleness it would surely have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts and always will, because God loves it, and thus everything has being through the love of God.'"

I am proposing that in view of the unfathomable measure of this love we must, like Julian, extend the mercy of the cross and resurrection to the whole hazelnut. God is with each creature now, with every wild predator and its prey, and with every dying chick, holding each in redemptive love, as midwife to that unforeseeable birth, in which all things will be made new. Of course, this has ethical consequences for our human behavior toward our kin. Such, I suggest, is the good news of the cross that needs to be heard in our era of ecological distress. It desperately needs to hear what Colossians called the Gospel proclaimed to every creature under heaven. Thank you.