



**SEASON OF  
CREATION**



## **TO HOPE AND ACT WITH CREATION**

Sermon & Worship ideas for September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

The Season of Creation lasts from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> October (the feast day of St Francis of Assisi) each year. It has support from all the major Christian denominations, with an Ecumenical Advisory Committee of which Dave Bookless is a member, and a Steering Group including Kuki Rokhum. Each year follows an agreed theme and this year's is 'To Hope and Act with Creation', based on Romans 8:18-25.

This year, 1<sup>st</sup> September is a Sunday, so we encourage A Rocha organisations and local Churches to hold special services. These materials are to help with that, and may be used, adapted and translated freely. Those churches which follow the Revised Common Lectionary will find some additional notes, but these materials assume that the main focus will be on **Romans 8:18-25** and the theme 'To Hope and Act with Creation'.

### **A Crisis of Hope**

Many people who are committed to tackling the ecological poly-crisis are in despair. It appears that, whilst our understanding of the scale and urgency of the crisis is growing fast, and we have many of the solutions available, we lack the will to make necessary changes at the personal, national and global levels.

[A 2021 survey](#)<sup>1</sup> of 10,000 children and young people across 10 countries showed 45% of respondents said that worry about climate change had a negative impact on eating, working, sleeping or other aspects of their daily lives. Moreover, levels of climate anxiety were highest in the Philippines, India and Nigeria and lowest in the United States and United Kingdom – contradicting the idea that eco-anxiety is just a rich-country problem. Perhaps this is because unprecedented extreme weather events are already impacting the global south most severely. This is no longer a fear about the future. It is a deep anxiety about daily life here and now.

The climate and biodiversity crisis is clearly an ethical and spiritual crisis, not just a scientific and political one. Gus Speth, a senior American environmental attorney and advisor on climate change, said, "I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00998-6>

<sup>2</sup> Speth, J. G. (2004). *"Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment"*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

## Where does our hope come from?

People seek for hope in many different ways. For many, the big global picture is so depressing that they seek hope in local actions, making a difference at a scale they can influence, and sharing small-scale good news stories. Some senior conservation scientists have launched a movement called '[Conservation Optimism](https://conservationoptimism.org/)' which seeks to counter the large scale despair by sharing "inspiring stories of regeneration and positive change, with nature making a difference in people's lives, and people valuing and nurturing their natural environment."<sup>3</sup> In many ways, A Rocha teams around the world reflect this philosophy, seeking to demonstrate hope through practical local projects incarnating care for creation through local communities.

Yet, hope based simply on optimism isn't enough. We can, in the famous words of Monty Python, "Always look on the bright side of life" but, as the lyrics somewhat depressingly continue, "Life's a laugh and death's the joke, it's true / You'll see it's all a show / Keep 'em laughin' as you go / Just remember that the last laugh is on you."<sup>4</sup>

Psalms 121:1-2 reminds us that we need to look beyond our everyday situations to find lasting hope:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains –  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.

Small-scale local hopes are fragile and easily lost. We may pick up litter or record the birds in our local park, but others will still dump their trash, migrating birds may fail to return, or our favourite piece of land may be lost to so-called development. A Rocha has campaigned for 40+ years to protect the [Alvor estuary in Portugal](#) and, more recently, the [Atewa forest in Ghana](#) and the [Watamu coral reef in Kenya](#). However, we cannot be certain that our hopes for these sites will not be disappointed. They are 'proximate' hopes, based on human actions aiming at tangible, visible results. In Romans 8:24, Paul is blunt: "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?" Working towards such practical hopeful outcomes is not worthless, but it needs something more substantial to sustain it.

Psalms 121 encourages us to look beyond our local, proximate contexts to 'the mountains'. Often, preachers have spiritualised these words, seeing the mountains as simply symbolic of a spiritual, other-worldly hope that we find in God. However, the Psalmist clearly links the mountains' solid physical presence to 'the Maker of heaven and earth', in other words to God's actions in creation. The hope that we have in God is not of escape from this world, but of God's transforming actions in the very world we live in. Jesus didn't offer to evacuate us from a sinking ship. He became flesh and blood, the Creator entering the creation, in order to redeem and restore the whole creation, including us.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://conservationoptimism.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://genius.com/Monty-python-always-look-on-the-bright-side-of-life-lyrics>

## Ultimate Hope

That's why Romans 8 speaks so powerfully into our current climate of despair and hopelessness. It recognises the mess we're in, 'our present sufferings' (v.18) and the 'frustration' and 'groaning' of creation (vs.20, 22). Real hope begins with lamenting our current hopeless situation, neither exaggerating nor down-playing how bad it is but facing the facts of the groaning of creation and the cries of the poor. Lament cries out to God, who created the mountains which demonstrate his powerful and good intentions for creation. Without heartfelt lament, and real repentance for our part in causing the situation we're in, there can be no genuine hope.

Yet, the emphasis of Romans 8 is not on creation's groaning but on its 'eager expectation' (v.19). The groaning of creation is a pregnant expectation, as is our own groaning (v.23) when we bring it to God. The 'pains of childbirth' (v.22) may be agonising but they are filled with the hope of new life to come.<sup>5</sup> That hope is made explicit in Romans 8:21: "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." This suffering and groaning world will be set free, released from its chains. Creation will give birth to new creation, not 'new' in the sense of replaced but 'new' in the deeply biblical sense of renewed, restored, redeemed, recycled.

This is a hope that is guaranteed and certain, because it is based on the character, actions and promises of God. It tells us that, however bad things get, there will be a day when Christ returns to renew and restore all things. We know this, first because God has created and cares for all things, second because God in Christ has entered our created world to "save the world" (John 3:17) through his death of the cross, and third because the resurrection of Jesus proves both that despair and death do not have the last word, and that a physical embodied new creation has begun.

However, there's one more astonishing truth in Romans 8. What is creation waiting for? It is both waiting to be liberated (v.21) but it is also "waiting for the children of God to be revealed" (v.19). In Paul's theology, 'the children of God' or 'Sons of God' means those who are adopted into God's family, in other words, the Church. Creation is waiting for the Church!

## To Hope and Act with Creation

If creation is waiting for the Church, that makes our hope something that leads to action now. If Christ will return in order to set right all ancient wrongs, to redeem sinners, to free the oppressed and to liberate creation, then that should drive us to hope and act with creation today. I have been deeply struck by the idea that hope is like a muscle. If we do not

---

<sup>5</sup> It's worth noting that Paul's image of creation as a pregnant woman gives biblical potential for redeeming the idea of 'mother earth', which is widespread in many indigenous cultures. Francis of Assisi used this language in his 'Canticle of the Creatures' (or '[Canticle of the Sun](#)'), which speaks of sun, wind and fire as brothers, of moon, stars, wind and bodily death as sisters, and of 'Sister Mother Earth'. This language is not meant to imply an animistic belief that these entities are living beings, but rather a relational worldview where we treat each part of God's creation in a fraternal or sisterly way and recognise that we are created from the earth (Genesis 2:7) as well as in the image of God. Such a worldview is surely more deeply biblical than the modernistic scientific materialism which turns everything into mere objects for human consumption.

use our muscles, they atrophy and become useless. But if we exercise them regularly, they grow. Hope is a muscle that grows as we use it. It is important for us to celebrate our hope for creation as part of our liturgy, our corporate worship, our personal prayer life. But it is also important that we turn our hope into action at the personal, local, national and international levels.

Our theme for Season of Creation 2024 is 'To hope and act with Creation'. That small word 'with' is significant. Creation is already waiting in eager expectation. Creation is already groaning in pregnant longing. In one English translation, Romans 8:19 reads "The entire universe is standing on tiptoe, yearning to see the unveiling of God's glorious sons and daughters!" So, sisters and brothers, our hope calls us to action. We ourselves cannot save the planet. But God, in his wisdom and power, has already accomplished the defeat of sin and death through Jesus' death and resurrection. We live now in anticipation of his glorious return, and we are called to acts of prophetic anticipation – seeking to demonstrate our eternal and ultimate hope within our proximate contexts. We are to plant trees, resist single-use plastics, conserve biodiversity, seek green technologies, treat fellow creatures with compassion, ensure climate justice for all. We do all these, not because we can save the world by doing them, but as acts of worship in hope, that Christ will take our humble offerings and transform them as part of the renewal and restoration of all things. Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!

#### **Notes on Lectionary Readings for Proper 17 / 15<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost / 14<sup>th</sup> after Trinity**

**Old Testament:** Song of Solomon 2.8-13 *or* Deuteronomy 4.1-2,6-9

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 is an uninhibited love-song which celebrates physical, erotic love between two people. Traditionally, it's also been seen as a parable of God's passionate love for his people, and our love for God. However, a third dimension is often missed! The Song is full of delightful descriptions of the natural world. Today's passage includes leaping stags, Turtle Doves, flowers, figs and vines. Creation's beauty and mystery speaks of God's love. In turn we love God not just spiritually, but through our love for other human beings and also through our loving actions to care for God's creation and allow it to reflect its worship to God.

Deuteronomy 4 contains God's words to his people as they are on the verge of occupying the Promised Land. On the surface the emphasis on 'keeping the rules' might encourage a dead legalism. However, v.6 gives us the purpose of God's commandments: "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" God blesses

**Psalm:** Psalm 45.1-2,6-9 *or* Psalm 15

**New Testament:** James 1.17-27

**Gospel:** Mark 7.1-8,14,15,21-23