

Watch with Creation at the Cross

Creation in Ashes

- ⊕ **“God saw that it was very good.”** (Genesis 1:1,31)
- ☠ **“The LORD looked and was displeased.”** (vv.12-16a)
- ⊕ **“His own arm worked salvation for Him.”** (vv.16b-18)
- ⊕ **Repentance prepares for glory.** (vv.19,20)

In their sleepy Gethsemane, Jesus asked His disciples, *“Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?”* (Matthew 26:40 NIV) O Lord, give us eyes to see and ears to hear as we begin our Lenten journey to *Watch with Creation at the Cross*. Amen.

In the Name of Him whose cross is our glory, dearly redeemed of God:

What was it about the Pharisee that earned him God’s displeasure for his prayer in the temple? He was one of the “church people” of his day, highly regarded by everyone, especially himself. He was so confident of his own righteousness as a Pharisee, he felt fine talking down the tax collector over there with his head down. And how could a despised tax collector receive Jesus’ commendation: *“justified before God”*? The lowly are raised up; the high and mighty are debased. Such is the message of this day when we behold **Creation in Ashes** and kneel at the feet of our suffering Savior to **Watch with Creation at the Cross**. May the dear Holy Spirit give us humble, repentant hearts with the tax collector that we too may go home *“justified before God”* who lifts up the lowly from the ash heap. (Psalm 113:7)

⊕ **“God saw that it was very good.”** (Genesis 1:1,31)

In the beginning there were no ashes, for *“in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* (Genesis 1:1 NIV) And when God had finished all His creative work on the sixth day, He looked deeper than the tiniest sub-atomic particle and far beyond the most distant galaxy and gave His complete approval. *“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31 NIV), or “good to the nth degree.” No one can blame God for the suffering and death in nature now.

In God’s *“very good”* creation He made a special garden paradise for Adam and Eve to enjoy their perfect “10” marriage. They lived in complete harmony with all the animals. Their “work” was harvesting the wonderful fruit that grew all around them without fertilizer, pesticides or herbicides because all of creation was thriving in perfect union with its Creator. God looked at their intimate relationship as husband and wife and pronounced that *“very good”* along with everything else. They had it “made in the shade” like no other couple in any other forest or farm would ever experience.

Only the Holy Scriptures of the Bible explain how God’s perfect **Creation** ended up **in Ashes**. Listening to his wife instead of his Lord, Adam, followed her as she tried to *“be like God knowing good and evil.”* At the Satan-serpent’s bidding, she took the forbidden fruit and *“gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked....”* The first attack on God’s perfect creation occurred when *“they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”* (Genesis 3:6f NIV) Ever since man sinned, God’s curse holds *“creation...subjected to frustration...[and] groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”* (Romans 8:20-22 NIV) Plants and animals suffer because of man’s sin.

One the most disgusting examples of God's frustrated creation occurred back in the 1980's when conservation officers in Africa kept finding magnificent gorillas slaughtered in the forest and left to rot minus their hands. Upon further investigation it was discovered that wealthy Europeans would pay big money for an ashtray made from the hand of a gorilla. But even such examples leave us shaking our heads like Pharisees at the greed and marterialsim of others. If you had a perfect smile and then broke out a tooth, or caught a massive dent in your brand new car, you could not begin to tell how the Creator was grieved by **Creation in Ashes**. Our own sinful lives prove that we were clearly in view when...

☠ **“The LORD looked and was displeased.” (vv.12-16a)**

It's hard reality ever since Adam's fall that the more one loves, the more it hurts when sin separates close relationships. No one gets engaged hoping to grieve your best friend. But the closer you are, the deeper the pain when we fail to live up to our expectations. The sin of Adam and Eve destroyed the perfect relationship they had with God and with each other.

Our rebellion against God is so insidious that His prophet Isaiah had to use several words to describe what we have done to offend our Creator: *“For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice....”*

In God's court of law all the evidence is stacked against us. The abyss between us and God is so deep we could never find our way back. In challenging times our nature wants to spin details for our own advantage. So often when family and friends need us most, the best we can muster is apathy. When we ought to come home grateful for such blessings as work and family, we show more love for strife, enslaved by personal opinions and selfish desires. No matter how patient God has been with us, we're far too easily angered. Even our worship mires in hypocrisy – like the Pharisee stuck on himself.

“The LORD looked and was displeased...,” for good reason, but also for something most mysterious. With **Creation in Ashes** why not bring in the cosmic bulldozer to level the universe and start over? We used to crumble up paper and throw it away. Now we simply delete fragmented or corrupted files. Why would the LORD God in His displeasure show feelings like this? *“He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.”* This is the mystery and wonder of every Lenten season:

✝ **“His own arm worked salvation for Him.” (vv.16b-18)**

What we see here in Isaiah 59, is some made-up god who did a little creating then walked away in disgust. This is not a jilted lover bouncing back and forth between courtroom and tantrum in order to even the score. Here we see intense determination to win back the object of His love and destroy every evil that hinders such wondrous love as this. This is a Hero putting on His body armor to go to into battle for His bride and rescue her from trouble that she brought on herself.

“He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.”

We are from those “islands” that brought enemies against the Champion Redeemer. *“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have*

been saved.” (Ephesians 2:3-5 NIV) God loved the world so much that He sent His Son Jesus to stand in the **Ashes** of His fallen **Creation** to reach out to God in perfect holiness by sacrificing Himself on the cross for our sins. As the only sinless Man, Jesus could reach into our heart to take upon His innocent soul all the heartache we cause God and each other. He is the Intercessor for whom Job was longing from his ash heap under God: *“If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both.”* Job was confident as he looked to his Redeemers from across the centuries, *“Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend.* (Job 9:33; 16:19-21 NIV)

✠ **Repentance prepares for glory.** (vv.19,20)

If you could *Watch with Creation at the Cross* looking far to the west across the continents and the Atlantic Ocean, you would see us gathered here for worship on Ash Wednesday as we join **Creation in Ashes** because of our sins. And looking far to the east, you would see more fellow sinners kneeling in humble repentance to the one true God in India, Southeast Asia, and China, even to the south in Africa and islands of Indonesia. What the Triune God promised through Isaiah has surely come to pass:

“From the west, men will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along. “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the LORD.

Repentance prepares for glory with God in paradise restored. No longer will east and west be in competition or at war for natural resources and worldly power. In hearts washed clean of sin and shame nothing but love will live for God and for each other. The saving Name-reputation of the Savior-God who created us, drove Him in boundless determination to redeem us at the cost of His own laid down life and innocent suffering and death. Souls that humbly admit their sin, are washed clean in the flood of forgiveness that the Holy Spirit blows upon them in waves of refreshment from His holy Word and sacraments. Like damned up water set free in a desert to make it bloom and grow, the grace of God pours over the souls and hearts and lives of those who were damned by their own choice because of their sin. But by God’s choice He redeemed us and by God’s choice He has brought us to this day to be sanctified and cleansed in the knowledge of sins forgiven and heaven won by God’s free grace.

“For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 TPA) Jesus Christ has already saved this planet along with all of God’s creation. This is the time to stand with **Creation in Ashes**, as life springs up from the forest floor after a fire. For now, *“creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”* (Romans 8:19 NIV) Lord Jesus, speed the Day! And bless our Lenten worship with life-renewing thanks and praise in the glory of true and humble repentance. Amen.