## Spiritual Practices for Creation in Crisis: The Criteria

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live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I attended a youth-led call-and-response rally in the capitol rotunda. Facing several hundred people, the cry of the young went up, "What do we want?" "Climate justice!" "When do we want it?" "Now!" Then repeat, repeat, repeat.

Why "climate justice?" That phrase has *never* been part of human history. Why now? Why not "What do we want?" "Social justice!" "When do we want it?" "Now!" That's long been a human cry.

"Climate justice!"—this new cry—has a unique context. The context is the first ever human-initiated geological epoch. It's called "the Anthropocene," the Age of the Human, because the human imprint is everywhere, even where humans don't live—in the high atmosphere, in the deep oceans, across polar ice caps and off into the future of evolution. The Age of the Human arises because two global economies, the global human economy and nature's economy, are incompatible. The incompatibility is this: the high speed and self-organizing capacities of global markets are in fundamental conflict with the slow speed and self-organizing capacities of ecosystems. Human economic time since the Industrial Revolution has consistently outstripped the biological time of nature's economy. It could do so because the human economy has been powered by compact, stored energy in the form of fossil fuels. That made industrialization possible everywhere and this in turn permitted the economic time of an extractive economy to outstrip biological time and override the regenerative needs of the primal elements—soil, air, fire (energy), water. This outstripping and overriding is true of industrialized, fossil-fueled human economies of every stripe, whether capitalist or socialist.

Let's say this again. It matters for Christian practices.

Every economy addresses three big factors: production, distribution, and consumption. Why, then, is nature's economy incompatible with, and harmed by, the industrialized economy? Because the primal elements of nature's economy have their own requirements for doing what they do. Water has its own terms for self-cleaning and combating pollutants, as does air. Soil has its own terms for generating and sustaining fertility. And all these have their own leisurely timelines for their renewal, timelines simply ignored by the human extractive economy using fossil fuels.

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The primal elements also have quantitative limits. The Lord God Jehovah isn't making any more water, just recycling what we have in its forms of vapor, liquid, snow, and ice. The hydrological system is one. You are using the same water that John did to baptize Jesus. Nor is the Lord God Jehovah making more air. Your 13,000 breaths a day draw from the same atmosphere Moses and Miriam breathed, though theirs was absent the greenhouse gases we've added. This means that doing what we do in our kind of economy, only more efficiently—more miles per fossil fuel gallon or conditioning more air or recycling more plastic bottles—will not suffice. New wineskins and cloth are needed, to remember the words of Jesus. That translates as a different kind of economy, one that flips the relationship of nature's economy and the human economy. The human economy and its demands cannot be the primary one, the one that drives all else, setting nature's economy in second place. Why? Because every human economy is utterly dependent on nature's economy, and derivative of it.

So here is the first takeaway. Planetary health is primary, human well-being is derivative. (Th. Berry) I will soon show why that relationship of human and other-than-human is vital for Christian practices.

"What do we want?" "Climate justice!" "When do we want

it?" "Now!" The kids demand a justice that is both ecological and ethical. It includes urgent social justice because those who contribute least to climate change are hurt first, worst, and, in the case of the kids, longest. But climate justice is more comprehensive than social justice. Social justice is human-to-human justice. Climate justice is creation justice. Remember: the primal elements—earth, air, fire, water—are truly primary. Increased human well-being on a degraded, diminished, poisoned, and pandemic-ridden planet is a dead-end when the human presence is large, and the planet is small. So, the second takeaway is: if there is no creation justice, there can be no lasting social justice.

My question is, how do we hymn the planet when human presence is everywhere, and we are the single strongest force of nature itself? Humans have become, for the very first time ever, a *geological* force. And we will be that for future generations, both human and other-than-human, as far forward as we can imagine. The fate of great sectors of the community of life is in our hands. It's long past time to remember the last chapter in Paul Tillich's 1948 volume, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, a sermon titled "Nature, Also, Mourns for the Lost Good."

So how might we hymn Earth differently? Let's start with criteria for all Christian spiritual practices. I simply assume that any Christian practices anytime, anywhere, will have strong biblical and theological roots. That goes without saying. I will address four additional criteria, tailored to our new epochal moment, itself experiencing shaking foundations. These four are the ecological, the sacramental, the ethical, and the ecumenical.

Time and space forbid treating each criterion separately and then parading numerous old and new practices past all four of them. Rather we'll visit one familiar practice—baptism—to illustrate all the criteria, with passing mention of the Eucharist. We'll do the same for one new ritual.

But first there is a backstory to say why ritual is vital and to show how disconnected from creation and creation justice Christian practices have become.

Why bother about rituals and spiritual practices in the Anthropocene? Because human beings are ritualizing animals and have always been. *Homo sapiens* insist on rituals. Try and name a culture or a time without them. There are none. We are incorrigibly ritualizing creatures. Our consciousness is symbolic consciousness and rituals are suffused with symbols.<sup>2</sup>

But our chief reason for bothering is that rituals are central to Christian community. In their fine work, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker describe what rituals do. *Saving Paradise* does so in a way that describes our innate ritualizing drive as well as the way rituals work for Christian faith.

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Rituals are the core of every community's life. They are like the bones of a body's skeleton, the framework that holds things into a shape, giving form to a community's values and relationships. Humans ritualize everything that matters: eating, sex, death, meeting strangers, resolving conflicts; they are our most significant forms of communication, more powerful than words...The familiarity, structure, and rhythm of rituals create a container that can hold the conflicts and tragedies that touch every life and every community. Rituals enable us to express and survive pain, anger, lamentation, and despair, while being held by others who know that the other side of pain is healing, the other side of anger is forgiveness, the other side of lamentation is joy, and the other side of despair is wisdom. Sensually rich rituals, full of life, orient us to material and spiritual beauties, embedding us more deeply in love for the world....<sup>3</sup>

What about Christian rituals during creation in crisis? Some old practices might take on new dimensions. For example, how do we, as dependent as ever on healthy water for life itself, live the baptismal life as we face a flood of water woes, including water's deadly absence? What about the Eucharist and your foodshed? Where does our food come from, at what costs and benefits to what peoples and land? What about food deserts, nutrition and malnutrition, and obesity or famine, in light of faith's invitation to share food with all? How does sacramental food at the welcome table, there by the grace of a self-giving God, face down the weal and woe of the food needs of "all the children," human and other-than-human children? What do Eucharist and baptism mean for bodily well-being, the well-being of our bodies and of all bodies in the community of life?

This is not new news. In another 1948 essay Paul Tillich included one chapter on "Nature and Sacrament." One line reads:

<sup>1.</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Wipf & Stock edition, 2012), 76-86.

<sup>2.</sup> See the discussion in Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 26-29.

<sup>3.</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Beacon Press, 2008), 418-419.

<sup>4.</sup> The dedication of Thomas Berry in his *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Bell Tower Press, 1999).

"The bread of the sacrament stands for all bread and ultimately for all nature." 5

We likely need new rituals as well. But before a deep dive into a ritual present from the beginning of Christian faith, baptism, I'll share a reading and two anecdotes. Then we'll see sanctuary architecture that gets the relationship of sacrament to creation right.

The reading is from the wonderful Iowa writer, Marilynne Robinson, in her work, *Gilead*. If *Gilead* has graced your time, you may recall that the elderly pastor, John Ames, his heart beating its mortality, pens memories to his young son by a second marriage so that the boy might remember his father.

One memory is about Ames when he was about his young son's age. He recalls how, as a pious child of a pious household "in a fairly pious town," he and friends baptized a litter of cats. These were dusty little barn cats, each swaddled in a doll's dress—the same dress for all—who had their brows moistened with "the full Trinitarian formula."

Except that the "grim" mother cat kept hauling her kittens off by the napes of their necks until young John the Baptizer and friends lost track of which were done and which were not. "We were fairly sure," writes Ames, "that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a great deal. So finally, I asked my father in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it. He replied that the Sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect. That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the Sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. I got his meaning, though, and I did no more baptizing until I was ordained."

Another goes like this:

You and Tobias are hopping around in the sprinkler. The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature, but it is rare. When I was in seminary I used to go sometimes to the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting the one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. It did look like a birth or a resurrection. For us the water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection. I've always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more shimmer and splash involved in the way we go about it. Well, but you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomp-

ing as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.<sup>9</sup>

Another time Pastor Ames writes of tree branches glistening in the sunlight after a little shower. "I don't know why I thought of that now," he writes, "except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it… This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it." <sup>10</sup>

This is an interesting, neglected planet. Let's pay attention to it and water, the matrix of life itself. Here are two anecdotes.

At a conference on Earth's waters of life and baptism, I proposed that either we declare a moratorium on baptisms until we have safe water for all the world's children, or we baptism with contaminated waters and say so. I called for a vote: Which do you want? The awkward silence seemed to indicate that a question which so closely tied baptism to the literal waters of life caught them off guard. Only one hand went up—my own. Wishy-washy, that audience.

The other tale is from a commencement address at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Commencement that year was a stirring worship service organized around baptismal renewal. My address was tailored to that and took up the "ethical vision of baptismal responsibility for Earth and its precious waters" (McGann, see below). Afterward, a seminary board member came up to me, said "thanks" and then said, "You know, I never really thought about baptism *and water*." Let that sink in. We have miles to go and rivers to cross to see the sacraments twinned to daily life. I didn't ask her if she thought about the Eucharist and the bread on her kitchen table.

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<sup>9.</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>10.</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>5.</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), from the chapter, "Nature and Sacrament."

<sup>6.</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), 21.

<sup>7.</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>8.</sup> Ibid.



Here is both font and altar in the sanctuary of Christ Lutheran Church, Pacific Beach, California The living waters and trees of life here reflect Ezekiel's and John of Patmos's vision of a new heaven and a new Earth in which the waters of life flow from the temple (Ezekiel) or from the throne of God in the midst of new Jerusalem (John), with trees of life beside the waters, bearing fruit for every season and leaves for the healing of the nations. Note that the whole is set within creation as the cosmos (the starry heavens as the backdrop and framework for all else).

This architecture came about from a Bible study by the pastor, the architect, and the muralist.

The first two photographs are from the narthex. The verse from Ezekiel 47:9 is divided in the stain glass: "Where the River Flows" is just left of the sanctuary entrance, "Everything Will Live" is just to the right of it. This prepares the worshipper, stepping through the entrance, to take in the full horizon of the sanctuary

and immediately meet the waters of life flowing under the stars, through the trees of life, under the altar table, down the steps and down the center aisle. There, in the center of the aisle and among the waters, is the baptismal font—sacramental water participating in the flowing waters of life. (See the two sanctuary photographs.) Christian spiritual practices of the waters of life (baptism) and the breaking of bread and pouring of wine (Eucharist) here belong part and parcel to God's creation as gifts of grace and life.

This church building is from the 1950s, renovated for an ecological, ethical, and sacramental vocation. That's a lesson for us. Living in the Anthropocene doesn't require a new building—this one is seventy years old—or only new rituals. It requires beginning with what we have, humble though it be, understanding it anew, and repurposing it. In a world long underway we can't start from scratch. There's no scratch to start from. Yet that is no deterrent for renewed practices that are life-giving, justice-committed, and





Earth-honoring. To cite Willis Jenkins, "It isn't that we need new theories or better approaches, but more so that we make our inherited concepts do new things."<sup>11</sup>

Now let's connect this sanctuary architecture to another criterion for every ritual practice in the Anthropocene. I borrow from Mary E. McGann in her essay, "Troubled Waters, Troubling Initiation Rites," in a fine collection edited by Teresa Berger, Full of Your Glory: Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation. 12 McGann says that, because we stand at a new moment for Christian practices, a new framework is needed, one with "an integrated vision, at once ecological, sacramental, and ethical—a vision that perceives a community gathered around the font as an interdependent species in the larger tapestry of life, part of the planetary web of creatures and elements through which courses the sacred energy of life itself."13 "Such an integrated vision," McGann goes on, [involves] "first, a truthful ecological vision of human identity within the web of life; second, an expansive sacramental vision of God's redemptive grace in rites of initiation and beyond; and third, a clear ethical vision of baptismal responsibility for Earth's precious waters."14

She's dived into baptism. We'll join her, keeping in mind that the three criteria she uses are integrated. They comprise an integrated vision of creation as a community.

Baptism and the ecological. Why water? Why not baptize with dust or bread crumbs, Twinkies, Oreo cookies, Coke or Dr. Pepper? Is it not because water is the matrix of life? Life emerges

from it. (That's why we send expensive rockets and landers to look for it elsewhere in the solar system.) Is it not because the water of your body matches Earth's body— 70% of your body and 70% of the planet's ocean waters? Is it not because your tears of joy and of sorrow are tears of salty water? Is it not because every people and every species knows in its body that water is life? A few days without water and you die. Moreover, you have no food at all, of any kind, without water to nourish soil and plants and animals and fungi. No water, no Trader Joe's or farmers market or agriculture. So, Mary McGann offers a twist on our takeaway that planetary health is primary, human well-being is derivative. Her version is, "Water's health is always primary. All other health, including human health, is derivative." Put that on your fridge door or office door as your baptismal responsibility.

OK, don't be so literal, you say; all this water talk is just metaphorical. No, not *just* metaphorical—that's an unwarranted diminishment of the meaning. Metaphors are powerful because *what gives rise to the metaphor*—here the waters of life, the waters from which life emerges, the waters utterly essential to all life—is powerful, indispensable, and, yes, sacred. Coke isn't sacred or essential or the source from which life emerges. So, we baptize with water, not Coke.

Brief as this is, we've intersected first criterion, the ecological, and we've implied the ethical, McGann's "vision of baptismal responsibility for Earth's precious waters." We'll turn to the sacramental.

Not all faith traditions focus attention on the sacramental in the way some do—Roman Catholics, the Orthodox churches, Anglicans, and Lutherans. Quakers don't, nor do Unitarian-Universalists. But all cherish and honor *the sacred*, the source of

<sup>11.</sup> Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), 43.

<sup>12.</sup> Mary E. McGann, "Troubled Waters, Troubling Initiation Rites," in *Full of Your Glory: Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation* (Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 333-352.

<sup>13.</sup> Ibid., 341. Emphasis mine.

<sup>14.</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>15.</sup> Ibid., 340.

the sacramental.

N. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer prize-winning author from the Kiowa Nation, says that "[t]he most important thing to do for the planet is reinvent the sacred." For him, as well as most, if not all, indigenous traditions, we will destroy the planet unless we deem it sacred and act accordingly. Or consider the same message via watercolors hanging in my office. Inscribed alongside seven varied panels of watercolors showing both creation's beauty and its denigration is a line from Th. Berry: "We will enter the future as a single sacred community or perish along the way."

Both Momaday and Berry, like McGann, weave the ecological, the ethical, and the sacred together. But what is the sacred and, derivatively, the sacramental?

The sacred is the ordinary in an extraordinary light. The sacred is the common uncommonly valued. The sacred is the transcendent in the midst of life. "In, with, and under" (Luther's phrase) the ordinary and common—water, bread, soil—is the presence and power of God. In, with, and under the common and the mundane the Spirit moves, as it did over creation's waters. The Spirit present everywhere in everything is why we can't keep from singing.

Consider this vignette.

"Saving Souls and Salmon" ran as a feature in the Sunday *New York Times*. What might this conjunction—salmon and souls—mean? Archbishop Alex Brunett led *Times* writer Jim Robbins to the baptismal font of St. James Cathedral in downtown Seattle. "The water isn't just sitting there," he said, pointing to its gentle movement. "We don't baptize people in stagnant water, but flowing water, water that is alive." The waters of life (baptism) and the waters of life (in this case, the Columbia River and salmon) was the connection. For the archbishop, the connection was sacramental. Saving souls and saving salmon belong to the same universe.

No less arresting is the name given this endangered watershed: a "sacramental commons." "We're trying to establish a sacredness in the world around us," the archbishop explained to Robbins. Establishing such sacredness assumes the lead tenet of all, not only Christian, religious sacramentalism. Namely, that material reality bears a value humans share and name but do not bestow. Such value is inclusive of all being and the manifestation of "the life-creating, sustaining, and redeeming presence and promise" of the divine throughout creation. <sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the pope hopped on board. The papal encyclical, *Laudato Si*', underscores this sacred value. It's a value intrinsic to life as such, the intrinsic value of all creatures and creation, a value that stands on its own as the handiwork of God, and, emphatically

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for the pope, not a value *we* confer and not a value that arises solely by virtue of its utility *for us.*<sup>19</sup>

"I never really thought about baptism *and water*," said the seminary board member. Or the Eucharist and the bread on her kitchen table. When she catches on to the ecological joined to the sacramental, she will.

And the ethical? My congregation in Santa Fe has a Whole Earth Covenant as a covenant of its identity. I will only quote one of the actions to which we commit ourselves. We commit ourselves to "recognize that as desert dwellers we have a special responsibility to protect its delicate ecosystems, and not least, to wisely use water which is precious to life."<sup>20</sup>

In keeping with this identity, every baptism in this congregation has a final baptismal vow that is asked, not just of the parents and sponsors, but of the whole congregation: "And do you promise to care for all the waters of creation?"

The ethical, for baptism, is more than responsibility for Earth's waters, however. Run, don't walk, to get the new book by Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, & Sexism* (Oxford University Press).<sup>21</sup> It directly intersects the social justice urgency of our Anthropocene moment.

Fortunately, the forgotten creed isn't wholly forgotten. Paul remembers it. It's Galatians 3:26-28. And it's a *baptismal* creed.

For you are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ; for as many of you who have been baptized have put on Christ:

there is no Jew or Greek;

there is no slave or free;

there is no male and female;

for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>16.</sup> N. Scott Momaday, cited from Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith*, 253.

<sup>17. &</sup>quot;Saving Souls and Salmon," The New York Times Week in Review, 22 October, 2000:5.

<sup>18.</sup> Therese DeLisio, Stretching the sacramental imagination in sacramental theology, liturgy, and life: A Trinitarian proposal for a cosmologically conscious age (Ph. D. thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 2007), 13. DeLisio's focus is the Triune God of Christianity. I have taken the liberty of extending her statement to all notions of divine presence.

<sup>19.</sup> This is a strong theme throughout *Laudato Si'* but see especially Paragraphs 6-12, 106-114, and 138-140. *Laudato Si'* is readily available both online and in hard copy. I draw here from the 2016 Orbis Books publication, with the extensive introduction by Sean Mcdonagh.

<sup>20.</sup> The Whole Earth Covenant of the United Church of Santa Fe is available on its website: unitedchurchofsantafe.org.

<sup>21.</sup> Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, & Sexism* (Oxford University Press, 2018). The discussion of the ethical and baptism are from Patterson's treatment even when I don't quote him.

The nearly forgotten creed, then, is a radical creedal statement of the Jesus movement. And it's soon compromised. Paul is serious here, as well as in Romans, that there is no longer Jew or Greek. He, or at least the writers of the deutero-Pauline letters, are not as fully on board with "there is no slave or free" and "there is no male and female." But Paul didn't delete those and he thus preserved the committed way of life of the earliest followers of Messiah Jesus.

How radical was this? Jew and Gentile at the time lived in sharply separated camps. The line between them was not erased, nor even dim. Yet "no slave or free" had no traction whatsoever in the Greco-Roman culture of that day. Slavery was not only essential to the economy, it was the order of creation itself. Some are born to be slaves, says Aristotle, others are born to rule.

"There is no male and female" has the same status as slavery. If ancient Grecian and Roman shakers and movers couldn't imagine life without slavery, they did no better in imagining life that wasn't patriarchal and misogynist. An early prayer for a boy or man was a prayer of thanksgiving that he was not born female.

Nor can you and I imagine life with no "us" and "them," life free of tribalism and devoid of race, class, and gender conflict. The ideology of otherness still reigns. We are not they and us is not them. Thank God, we say. The early Christian baptismal liturgy and profession of faith said otherwise and did so without compromise.

In short, baptism means radical social justice together with responsibility for the waters of life. Get used to it. Live with it. It's creation justice woven of the ecological, sacramental, and ethical.

We finish with a new ritual that is ecological, sacramental, ethical, and ecumenical as well. You can read of it in *The Christian Century* in a review January 1 titled "All earth is grieving," by Isaac Villegas. Here's his first paragraph:

Plants were invited to worship as the guests of honor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City this past September. During their chapel service, students confessed their sins against nature to the flora which occupied the center of the space—peace lilies and pothos vines, ornamental millet and a rattlesnake plant, basil and a palm tree, all of them resting in pots on a patch of soil. People were invited to offer words of repentance to the plants. "I confess that so many trees held me in their branches as I grew," one student professed during the service, "but I have not held you in return." Throughout the service, people referred to the plants as subjects worthy of address, with the personal intimacy of "you." <sup>22</sup>

That service went viral on social media. Lavish gratitude poured in from some, condemnation poured in from others (because of alleged paganism).

A confession of sins against the modern world has antecedents in Christian liturgies but for many on this side of the Industrial

e are inevitably "all in this together." Both climate disruption and the coronavirus are genuinely global even though they affect different peoples differently.

Practices, including spiritual practices, should cast a planet-scanning eye and strive to be ecumenical and, equally important, interfaith.

Revolution it would be a new ritual, indigenous Christian traditions excepted.

I am going to nominate one more spiritual practice. We live in a moment that asks our basic commitments at a time when the world has, with climate rupture and a viral pandemic, irrevocably changed. How now, at a new crossroads, are we to live? Or, to remember water and baptism, how are we to live at this watershed moment? Sit down with your congregation and write a creed. What creed would you write now such that your life depended upon it?

Discussion of the fourth criterion, the ecumenical, will be very brief. One of the most obvious of Anthropocene realities is that, for better and for worse, we are inevitably "all in this together." Both climate disruption and the coronavirus are genuinely global even though they affect different peoples differently. Practices, including spiritual practices, should cast a planet-scanning eye and strive to be ecumenical and, equally important, interfaith. For that I direct you to Part II of my book, Earth-honoring Faith. There the deep, shared traditions of the world religions address the forces that are presently destructive of the planet and its economy. Asceticism speaks to consumerism, the sacred addresses the commodified, mysticism counters alienation, prophetic-liberative practices counter oppression, and wisdom faces down folly. In this new epoch, new conversations and new wineskins are needed (Luke 5:36-39). These shared, deep traditions are readily available for both new conversations and new wineskins.

<sup>22.</sup> Isaac Villegas, "All earth is grieving," *The Christian Century*, January 1, 2020.