
Created and Creating
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 4:11-28, Psalm 14, and Luke 15:1-10

I need to ask you something. Does anyone here know - or does anyone care - that we are now in a church season called the “season of creation”? Is there a history of celebrating the “season of creation” here at Wesley? In any case, this Sunday is already the second Sunday in the season of creation. Depending on whose liturgy you are following, last week was “Ocean Sunday”. Next week is “Storm Sunday”. The week after is “Cosmos Sunday”. And some churches will follow that up a week later with a blessing of the animals. And - if you are interested - this week is “Fauna and Flora” Sunday.

If you have never heard of the “season of creation”, it might be because it's a relatively new idea to set aside a liturgical season to celebrate creation. The other reason you may not have heard of the season of creation is because - as far as I know - we don't have the right colour banners. The banners for this season are orange!

But as with all new traditions - we get to decide how we will celebrate it. What do you think we should do during a period called the “season of creation”?

[what does it mean? What have you done in the past?]

For me, I find it hard to think about “creation” without thinking about our planet. And I find it hard to think about our planet without thinking about the environment. And I find it hard to think about the environment without thinking about environmental problems. But once I think about environmental problems, I usually just want to stop thinking all together.

That might surprise you, given that I used to work as an environmental scientist. You might expect that I would love to talk about the environment. But don't forget - I stopped doing that work - for a number of reasons. And one of the reasons was that too much of the focus on the environment these days seems to fall back to either fear, or guilt. And I try to avoid using fear and guilt as tools as much as I can.

Often, environmental concerns are presented in ways that create a great deal of both fear and guilt. And that's only natural. How can you *not* generate fear when we discuss climate change, soil degradation, ozone depletion, pollution, floating islands of plastic, etc. And in churches, we often make matters worse. Many of the liturgies designed for the “season of creation” are designed to remind us that God made creation good, and we are destroying it. So not only do we have to deal with our fears, but we have to deal with our own sense of guilt too. In the church we can take fear, add some theology, and make guilt!

Feelings of fear and guilt are hard to avoid. We are constantly bombarded with messages of fear and guilt on a regular basis. It's hard to read or watch the news without being fed a lot of fear. But I heard good news this week. Apparently, marketing strategists are now moving away from fear-based advertising. They are moving away from fear-based approaches because using fear as a tool is not effective in the long term, because people just burn out from too many messages of fear. That's the good news.

The not-so-good news is that marketing strategists are re-tooling to use guilt-based advertising. Isn't that wonderful? Instead of our media pumping us full of fear, they now want to pump us full of guilt.

One example of this comes from governmental efforts to get people to stop smoking. For years, the government has paid for advertisements detailing the health risks of smoking. These ads surfaced in the United States in the 1960's, following the release of the Surgeon General's comprehensive study of the negative health effects of smoking.¹ Today of course, that's old news, and we all have a good sense of the health implications of smoking. But according to the publication *MarketingWeek* and Alex Hesz's book, “Guilt Trip”, the message of fear is not that effective at getting adults to stop smoking. “Research shows that the health implications of smoking are easily dismissed by smokers. However, the harm that smoking causes to your family is an immediate and hard-hitting insight that proves motivation and impactful in research”²

Mark Lund, the chief executive of Britain's Central Office of Information agrees, “Lund agrees that the [the ministry] has stopped using fear as a motivator because it doesn't appear to

1 <http://www.antismokingadvisor.com/anti-smoking-ad-campaigns>

2 <http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/the-guilt-appeal/3007660.article>

jolt people into action. Fear tends to have the side effect of disempowering the person who sees it, so they can be very powerfully affected but lose their sense of urgency.”

John Poorta of Leo Burnett “agrees that guilt is the right emotion 'some of the time' ... but believes that on *many* occasions, a *positive* emotion will motivate people to change their behaviour.” So perhaps advertising is moving not only from fear to guilt, but also from guilt to embracing the use of positive emotions.

The same type of transformation is happening in the fitness industry. How often have you seen an advertisement from your local health club - right after Christmas - encouraging you to come in and “burn off the festive bulge”. Or to get your body ready for the beach just before March break? And it works pretty well for selling gym contracts. But most new gym members find that their interest wanes after a few weeks. And then, “every time a member fails to make it to the gym, it sets off a guilty twinge”. Those gyms are marketing guilt.

But the gym chain “Virgin Active” is challenging all of this, and is now pushing gym memberships using positive messages. Messages about how going to the gym can fit into a positive lifestyle, how gyms are about fun and movement. Virgin is trying to give a boost of fitness to the fitness marketing industry!

But in fact, I believe the move from fear-based messaging to guilt-based messaging is not a new idea at all. In fact, I think it is laid out in today's scriptures. In our reading from Jeremiah, the author has God saying “a hot wind comes from me ... not to cleanse ... a wind too strong for that ... woe to us for we are ruined”. I'm not sure how that message would have been heard during the time of Jeremiah, but it definitely sounds like a message designed to produce fear. And the description of the future to come fills me with fear - “I writhe in pain ... disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.” The text reminds me of many environmental presentations I've heard!

But the message in Psalm 14 is not only about fear – it is also about guilt – because the message in that Psalm is not so much about punishment as it is about human frailty - “they are corrupt ... they are all perverse ... there is no one who does good, no, not one.” Sounds like marketing by guilt.

And the message in the gospel is about the positive emotion of ... joy. After searching for the missing sheep, the shepherd “calls his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice

with me, for I have found the sheep that was lost.” And the woman who found the coin “calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost'.”

Whether we read the scriptures, or talk about the environment, or consider a gym membership, we have choices. We can choose whether we want to accept and be controlled by fear, by guilt, or by joy. And particularly as we consider creation today – what will we pick? What lens will each of us use to engage with the growing pains of creation that are all around us?

If you want to use the lens of fear or guilt, I can provide many resources for you, or you could just turn on the T.V. But what about the lens of joy? One way to engage with creation with joy is to simply spend time “out there”. Creation is beautiful. Most of us enjoy spending time outside. But there's more to it than that.

To me, creation can be engaged with with a lens of joy. Because creation has a trump card. “Creation” does not *only* mean the cosmos that has existed for a long time. “Creation” does not *only* mean our current environmental struggles. Of course, creation does include those things. But “Creation” also includes the ability to keep creating. “Creation” is about the future as much as it is about the past. And we can create as we can imagine. So, for a better creation, we just need to keep creating new positive realities. That's creation's trump card - that creation is neither static nor finished. Creation is ongoing. Creation is continuous.

The gift of creation is not that it is perfect, or even that – as it says in Genesis - “it is good”. The gift of creation is that we are not only a product of creation, but each one of us is also a producer of creation. We can choose to be passive recipients, or we can choose to be active creators.

This season of creation, let's honour creation by ... creating.

Amen.