Boundaries: Ecological Theology, Migration, and the Sacredness of the Non-Human

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Introduction

Good afternoon. I am honored to be with you at ISSRNC to explore **"Re-envisioning Boundaries"** in an age of ecological crisis. We live in a time of **shifting boundaries** – rising seas blur the line between ocean and land, climate disruptions force people and wildlife to migrate across borders, and the old divisions between "us" and "nature" no longer hold. As a Christian thinker and a Carolinian, I approach this topic with both an academic curiosity and a pastoral heart. Today, I invite us to journey through **ancient wisdom and contemporary experience**, from biblical and modern exiles to ancient narratives and modern hurricanes, to discover how reimagining boundaries can inspire a more compassionate, *sacred sense of interconnected life*.

Ancient Wisdom: Theology of Creation, Exile, and Sacred Land

In the Christian tradition, the theme of **migration and sacred land** runs deep. The Bible begins with humanity's first exile, Adam and Eve leaving Eden, and ends with a vision of a renewed holy city. Indeed, biblical stories form a grand migration from the *"land of exile" in Genesis to the land of promise in Revelation.* [i] Throughout Scripture, key theological motifs are tied to

movement: the *Exodus* from Egypt, the wilderness sojourn, the exile in Babylon, and the hope of return. These narratives link migration with **theological themes** of *fall and restoration, covenant and community, foreigner and home, land and solidarity.*[ii]. They teach us that encountering God often means crossing boundaries, leaving the familiar, embracing the stranger, and finding the sacred in new lands.

Historical Christian theology likewise speaks to the value of **diversity in creation**. *D*rawing on *Aristotle's* sense of purpose in nature, Thomas Aquinas argued that no single creature can reflect the fullness of God. Therefore, God "produces diverse creatures so that the inadequacy of the representation of anyone may be made up by others". In other words, every creature, from angel to human to sparrow, contributes something unique to the cosmic choir of praise. Aquinas' Aristotelian vision envisions a harmonious order in which each being has its own telos and purpose within the whole. Although framed in a hierarchical context, this medieval insight contains a seed of ecological truth: **the whole universe shares in and represents divine goodness more perfectly than any creature alone**. All land is *holy land* in that sense, for *"the earth is the Lord's"* and every part of creation has sacred worth.

The Bible reinforces this idea by calling us to respect the sanctity of land and life. In Leviticus, God declares the land itself not to be sold permanently, *"for the land is mine; you are but foreigners and sojourners with me."* The *promised land* was holy because of God's gift to Israel and because God's presence hallowed the ground. When Moses approached the burning bush, he was told, "Remove your sandals, for the place you stand is holy ground." In Christian thought, **boundaries like nation or ethnicity are ultimately secondary**. What's primary is God's claim on creation and the mandate to welcome the sojourner. As one theologian

notes, *Christianity is inherently migrant*, from Abraham's journey to Jesus' incarnation, God often works through boundary-crossing. Our own time of climate-forced migration challenges us to recover this biblical ethos: to see refugees and displaced neighbors not as "others" outside our boundaries, but as *part of the People of God's journey*, deserving hospitality and justice. And this extends to all creatures.

Embodiment and Perception: A Phenomenological Lens

To re-envision boundaries, we also turn to **phenomenology**, the study of how we perceive and experience the world. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty* taught that our consciousness is not a disembodied intellect observing a separate world but *embodied* and entwined with the world around us. He spoke of *"the flesh"* of the world, a chiasmic intertwining of self and environment that **dissolves the boundary between subject and object**. When I place my hand on the rough bark of a Carolina pine, *I am not only touching the tree; the tree is touching me back*. In Merleau-Ponty's view, **perception is a reciprocal exchange**, a dialogue, between human and more-than-human beings. The boundary between "me" and "tree" becomes porous. We meet in the in-between, in the flesh of the world.

Building on this, the phenomenologist and later Carmelite Nun *Edith Stein* offers insight into empathy and intersubjectivity. Stein, a student of Husserl, explored how we enter into another's experience. For her, *Einfühlung* (empathy) is not just a psychological mirroring; it is an **embodied, affective act** of perceiving the world *through the eyes (or skin) of the other*. Stein asks: why limit this to human others? If we bracket our ego and truly listen, can we not empathize with a hurt animal, a stressed forest, or a polluted river? She suggested that by "bracketing out" our own biases, we allow the other (whether person or pine tree) to disclose

itself on its own terms. Such empathy can extend beyond the human. *"Just as we empathize with another person's suffering, we can empathize with the suffering of a dying forest or an acidifying ocean*." In this **ecological empathy**, our hearts recognize that the pain of creation is in some sense our own pain. We *feel with and through the world*, not just think about it.

Phenomenology thus reframes boundaries: the line between self and other, human and animal, is not a wall but a membrane. Our bodies and senses *participate in a larger body of life*. This perspective challenges the sharp Human/Nature divide of modern thought. It invites us to see, as Merleau-Ponty did, that *nature is not an external object but the very medium of our being*. We are already in community – in communion – with the more-than-human world at every moment, breathing the same air, exchanging touch and gaze with other lives. **What if we treated those boundary encounters as sacred?**

The Carolinas at a Crossroads: Climate Change and Displacement

With this theological and phenomenological grounding, let's turn to our immediate context, the **Carolinas, and the ecological and migration challenges we face**. Climate change is not an abstract future threat here; it is our lived reality. In recent years, we Carolinians have witnessed unprecedented hurricanes, floods, heat domes, and rising seas that test the resilience of our communities.

Consider *Hurricane Helene* in 2024. Helene was an enormous storm – *"a 420-mile-wide, slow-spinning conveyor belt of wind and water"* – that first drowned parts of Florida's Gulf Coast and then barged northward through the Carolinas. By the time it was done, it had destroyed homes, bridges, and livelihoods, shaking people's faith in the safety of living in the South. Helene was

not an isolated freak event; it was *"the latest in a new generation of storms"* supercharged by warmer oceans and atmosphere. It dumped torrential rainfall far inland. In the mountains of western North Carolina, local observers described "whole communities that were isolated and devastated by creeks swelling to the size of roaring rivers". Trickle streams became raging torrents overnight, taking out roads and homes. We had never seen anything like it.

Such events force human *migration*. Families who never imagined leaving their hometowns are now facing hard choices. The flooding from Helene and other storms has already driven some North Carolinians to seek safer ground. Researchers estimate that **tens of millions of Americans may eventually relocate** due to worsening heat, storms, flooding, and wildfires. Here in the Carolinas, the writing is on the wall (or perhaps on the shoreline). When beaches erode and inland towns flood, people move. But who gets to move, and who is left behind? As one report noted, those *with means and mobility* often leave, while the poor and elderly get stranded in the flood-prone areas, more vulnerable than ever. Climate migration is already reshaping our region's demographics and pressing our moral responsibility to care for those "left behind."

Beyond storms, the **slow crisis of sea-level rise** is gnawing at our coastlines. In North Carolina, sea level has risen about 7 inches just in the last decade and a half.[iii] That might not sound like much, but it has proven enough to cause what used to be rare flooding to happen regularly. *"High tides with just a little wind are causing flooding in areas that haven't flooded in the past,"* one coastal scientist notes[iv]. On the Outer Banks, over ten beachfront homes have collapsed into the Atlantic since 2020 as the dunes recede. Each fallen house is a tangible symbol that the **boundary between land and sea is always shifting**. For those families, the loss is deeply personal, a home filled with memories, gone. But it is also ecological and spiritual: the

ocean reclaims what perhaps should never have been built upon so precariously, reminding us that all coastal developments are provisional, at the mercy of the great tides.

And yet, despite these warnings, there is enormous **pressure for more coastal development**. Beautiful barrier islands and waterfronts continue to see new vacation homes, resorts, golf courses (so many golf courses), and highways. It's understandable, the Carolina coast is economically valuable and culturally beloved. But this creates an ethical tension: *to shore up and rebuild* in harm's way, or to retreat and let certain boundary lands return to the wild sea? Some local leaders have even suggested banning new beachfront construction in the highest-risk zones.[v] However, economic incentives ("free money" from lucrative rentals, as one official quipped) often prevail over caution. This is a boundary question: do we see the coastline merely as real estate to be parceled and sold, or as a *sacred living margin* between ocean and continent that demands reverence and restraint?

Related to development is the push for expanding **energy infrastructure** in our region. Even as climate change intensifies, we face proposals for new fossil fuel projects, highways, pipelines, and offshore drilling that cross our state and coastal waters. A few years ago, for example, the Atlantic Coast Pipeline was slated to cut through eastern North Carolina to bring natural gas from Appalachia. Conservationists warned that such a project could damage wetlands, rivers, and communities along its path. *"There could be environmental impact for the coastal region too,"* one advocate noted, emphasizing that North Carolina's delicate *hydrology – its network of streams and wetlands – would be at risk*, along with increased greenhouse gas emissions.[vi] That particular pipeline was canceled in the end, but the tension remains: our society's **boundary between "energy demand" and "environmental protection"** is fraying. We cannot keep

drawing cheap energy from the earth without harm. Every new offshore drilling test or pipeline easement we approve is a line drawn across the body of the land, a line that often cuts through vulnerable communities and ecosystems. How might we re-envision those lines? What would it look like to treat our coastal plains, rivers, and mountains not as *sacrifice zones* but as sacred?

Sacredness of the More-Than-Human: Reframing Our Ethical Response

This brings me to a key theological insight: the **sacredness of the more-than-human world**. If we truly believe "the earth is the Lord's," then all creatures and elements carry a trace of the divine. They are not just resources for us to use; they are fellow members of creation's community. The late eco-theologian *Thomas Berry* captured this in one powerful line: *"The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects… The human is derivative. The planet is primary."*[vii] Let that sink in… a communion of subjects. Berry reminds us that rivers, forests, marshes, and coastlines are **subjects** in their own right, living participants in the sacred choir of life, not mere objects or scenery. And humanity, for all our special capacities, is *derivative*, meaning we come late to the scene, utterly dependent on this planetary communion that birthed us.

What happens if we take this seriously? For one, our ethical calculations shift from human-centered to *life-centered*. The plight of an endangered species or a polluted river is no longer a niche concern; it becomes a matter of justice within the family of creation. We start asking "what do we need from the land?" and "what does the land need from us?" In practical terms, seeing animals and ecosystems as sacred subjects can inspire new approaches to climate-driven migration. For example, as rising temperatures force wildlife to move, say, a bird species shifting

its range northward or a marine creature seeking cooler waters, do we assist them with wildlife corridors and protected routes? Do we remove some of the barriers (our highways, our dams) that block their sacred journey? Black bears, panthers, and plants move uphill or poleward to survive in the Carolinas. Each of these migrations is a **boundary-crossing** prompted by climate. If we honor the *sanctity* of these lives, perhaps we feel compelled to make room for them, expand our parks' boundaries, create safe passages, and reduce the obstacles we have thrown in their way.

Likewise, for human climate migrants: if we view those fleeing flooded homes or drought-stricken farms as part of *"the least of these"* (to use Jesus' words for vulnerable neighbors), our response can become one of compassionate welcome. Remember that Jesus himself *crossed the ultimate boundary*, leaving his heavenly "home" to become flesh and dwell with us, a migrant God among humanity. The **Incarnation** is God's radical act of boundary-crossing in solidarity with a suffering world. And in his life, Jesus constantly broke social boundaries, touching lepers, dining with foreigners, speaking with Samaritan women, and embracing children. He revealed that *love knows no borders*. If we let that model guide us, then welcoming today's climate migrants (and indeed any refugees or outcasts) is not just social policy, it is a sacramental act, recognizing the image of God in those who seek safety and hope.

Seeing creation as sacred also reframes how we **prepare for and respond to disasters**. A hurricane, for instance, is often described in pure catastrophe terms, which of course it is, in human experience. But through another lens, a storm is also a natural force, part of the earth's larger patterns, albeit intensified now by our actions. What if, instead of only thinking of how to *defend against* hurricanes, we also asked how to *live in a respectful relationship with* the

waters and winds? This might sound abstract when people's lives are on the line. Yet indigenous communities, including some in the Carolinas, have long seen storms, fires, and floods as holding lessons, sometimes as the land's way of telling us something. Are the overflowing creeks of Hurricane Helene **telling us** that the mountains cannot absorb infinite development and deforestation?[viii] Perhaps the lesson is humility: do not build recklessly in floodplains, preserve forests to hold the rain, heed the *warnings of creation's groaning*. In this sense, perceiving sacredness in the non-human world gives us a kind of reverent attentiveness. We listen to what the animals, the weather, and the very soil are communicating about the state of things, and we adjust our ethics accordingly.

Crossing Boundaries as Sacred Acts of Interconnected Life

Finally, I want to tie these threads together under the theme of **"boundary-crossings as sacred."** We've considered theological boundaries (between God, humans, and nature), physical boundaries (land/sea, national borders), and conceptual boundaries (self/other, subject/object). In each case, *climate change is challenging us to rethink the boundary*. Sea levels cross the boundary of coastlines; species and people cross borders seeking refuge; even elements, fire, water, earth, and air, seem to transgress old limits (as in wildfires "out of season" or hurricanes reaching places they never did before). It is easy to view all this as destabilizing and frightening. But alongside the fear, **there is a profound truth of interdependence unfolding**. The crossing of boundaries can be a *revelation* of how deeply everything is connected.

In Christian theology, some boundary-crossings are indeed sacred: think of the **veil of the Temple tearing** at the moment of Christ's death, the boundary between divine and human thrown open. Or Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries to

unite a diverse crowd. Or the vision of the New Creation, where *"the glory of the nations"* flows into the New Jerusalem, implying the gathering of all peoples beyond their separations. God seems to delight in turning boundaries into meeting places. **What if we viewed the current movements of peoples and ecosystems in a similar light?** Not to romanticize suffering, the trauma of losing one's home to flood or fire is real and grievous. Yet, can we perceive in these migrations the *voice of the Spirit* urging us toward a new kind of community? A community less defined by rigid borders and more by shared vulnerability and care for one another?

Imagine a Carolinas (and a world) where we treat **climate migrants** not as invaders or "others," but as pilgrims on a difficult journey whom we are called to accompany. Our state motto here in South Carolina is *"While I breathe, I hope."* As people come seeking higher ground, literally and figuratively, can our churches and institutions be oases of hope, breathing welcome rather than fear? In practical terms, this could mean creating sanctuary zones inland, developing cooperative relocation programs, remembering that our ancestors were often migrants too (whether fleeing war, famine, or seeking a better life). It also means recognizing that sometimes *the land itself needs to migrate or be given room*: rivers need floodplains, coasts need wetlands as buffers. In some cases, the most sacred act might be to **yield** a boundary, to retreat from an eroding shore and let the marsh come back, absorbing the tides as it was meant to. Such a retreat can be seen not as defeat, but as *participation in the healing of creation*, an acceptance that our human boundaries must adapt to the larger realities of the Earth.

In crossing boundaries, whether by choice or necessity, there is also a possibility of **transformation**. Think of the biblical Ruth, a Moabite migrant, whose crossing into Israelite land and life led her to become an ancestor of King David and, in Christian tradition, of Christ.

Or think of how, after the exile in Babylon, the Jewish people's faith was refined and their scriptures compiled, exile became exodus to a renewed identity. Perhaps in the climate upheavals of today, as communities are dislocated, we will find new, *wider* identities. We may come to see ourselves truly as *earthlings*, not just Americans or Carolinians or any narrower group, but members of one Earth community bound by fate. The Earth, our common home, is pushing us to realize that what affects one will affect all.

Thus, **re-envisioning boundaries** means seeing sacred connections where before we saw separation. It means expanding our moral imagination to include the forests, the rivers, the coastal estuaries, and yes, the carbon and the wind and the rain, in our circle of concern. It means believing that when a boundary is crossed, be it a deer venturing into a suburban yard or a family seeking shelter across a border, *God may be present in that very crossing*, challenging us to respond with grace.

Toward an Ecology of the Cross

In closing, I return to the image of the Cross, a symbol at the heart of my own theology and the inspiration for what I call an "Ecology of the Cross." The Cross of Christ was planted at a crossroads of boundaries: heaven and earth, human and divine, innocence and injustice, life and death. In Jesus' broken body, we see the pain of a broken world, a world that includes broken ecosystems and broken communities alike. But the Cross is also the *tree of life* blooming in a wasteland, the place where new creation sprouts from the old. It teaches us that **sacrifice and love can bridge any divide**.

Ecologically, an "Ecology of the Cross" would mean that we are willing to give of ourselves, even to suffer losses, to heal the earth and our neighbors. It may mean sacrificing some

convenience, luxury, or economic gain to safeguard the *sacred boundaries* of nature and to aid those who must migrate. It may mean a kind of *kenosis* (self-emptying), pouring ourselves out in love, because we recognize the face of Christ not only in other people but in the beleaguered land itself. The Cross invites us to stand *with* those who suffer, human or non-human, and to find hope in solidarity.

Friends, the challenges in the Carolinas and across our planet are immense. But we are not without guidance. We have the deep wells of Christian thought, Aquinas reminding us of the goodness in every creature, Scripture reminding us we're all sojourners on God's land, and the incarnation reminding us God crosses into creation out of love. We have phenomenological insight that we are intertwined with a living world that perceives and responds. We have the testimony of storms and seas crying out for change, and the quiet testimony of seed and soil, always ready to renew if given the chance.

Our task is to **re-envision the boundaries** that define our lives, consecrate them, soften them where they have hardened our hearts, and firm them where they protect what is sacred. The theologian of migration, Groody, said that *the story of God's people is one of people who move*, and that we should therefore welcome migrants as central to our faith story.[ix] I would add: the story of God's *creation* is one of continual movement and exchange – the water cycle, the migration of birds, the flow of energy from sun to plant to animal. Interdependence is the law of life. Recognizing the **sacredness of that interdependence** is the beginning of true wisdom in this climate crisis.

Let us then go forth with eyes open to the sacred in all things. Let us greet the rising sea with engineering, reverence, and readiness to adapt. Let us meet the migrant and the refugee not with

fear, but with embrace and shared humanity. Let us protect the forests and the coastlands as holy ground, teeming with God's glory. And when boundaries must be crossed, by a desperate family, an at-risk species, or the surging elements, let us remember that *God may be at work in the crossing*. We may well be entertaining angels unawares.

In re-envisioning our boundaries, may we find that they are not walls but **thresholds** to a more just, compassionate, and ecologically harmonious world. Thank you.

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