First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

4/21/24

A New Heaven and A New Earth

Isaiah 65:17-19 - NRSV

17 For I am about to create new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress.

One of my favorite TV series of all times has to be Mad Men. If you’ve never seen it, the series centers on Don Draper, a successful advertising executive in 1960s New York City, who is living the American Dream. Don lives in the perfect suburban home with Betty, his perfect wife, and the requisite two children who are, of course, perfect. In one scene, that sticks in my mind, Don and Betty and their two perfect children, go on a picnic. The setting is a beautiful (dare I say perfect) park, and you see this lovely family picnicking under a towering, majestic oak tree. As the Drapers finish their meal and get up to leave in their perfect 1962 baby blue Cadillac convertible, (a car I would die to own if y’all need ideas for what to get me for my next birthday) we see Betty picking up the blanket that the family has been sitting on, shaking off the debris onto the lawn, joining her family in the car and simply driving away, leaving trash from their picnic laying all over on the ground.

This scene has stuck with me because of the contrast between the idyllic setting, showcasing this beautiful family and their wholesome afternoon in the park, juxtaposed against a total disregard for the environment. That juxtaposition, of course, was exactly the point the writers and director were trying to make and my raised eyebrow was, of course, exactly the reaction they were hoping to achieve. I think this perfectly illustrates where I’d like to take the sermon today, so welcome to Earth Day Sunday.

Looking at the Isaiah reading, we see that it primarily addresses the people who were left behind after the Babylonian invasion and conquest. Remember, when Babylon conquered Israel and Judah, the Temple was destroyed and the entire upper class; the royal court, the religious leadership, and the military leaders, all were carried away into captivity. The folks who were left behind were the poor, the working class; any who were deemed to have no value to the Babylonians. Now, many years later, Cyrus the Great has freed the captives and allowed them to return home. There is considerable conflict and tension between the returning exiles and those who had endured years of occupation and deprivation at the hands of successive invaders and colonizers, and it was this remnant that Isaiah is trying to comfort.

The message that God, speaking through Isaiah, gives to these tired, beaten down, survivors, is simple: *“…Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.”* What I find interesting in this simple phrase, is the use of the present tense: *I am creating.* God is saying that the new Heaven and new Earth are in the process of being created right now. Hang tight, it’s on the way.

Fast forward five thousand years, and that phrase, “I am creating,” still resonates. The idea that the creation story isn’t finished, and that God is still working, should give us immense hope and joy, and it does. But, there’s a catch.

I don’t believe God ever intended for the act of creation to be God’s responsibility alone. God, in creating humankind, gave us the intellect, the heart, as well as the desire to be co-creators with God to bring about that new Heaven and new Earth, as promised in today’s text.

I’ll pause here for a moment, and ask: how does hearing that God is calling us to be co-creators of this new reality make you feel? Inspired? Frightened? Overwhelmed? All of these? For me, the answer is all of these, but consider this: We are called to be God’s hands and feet in our world, and while many believe that call only extends to the spiritual realm, I would argue that the call goes beyond only caring about churchy, or spiritual things to include caring for our physical world as well. I believe the phrase a new Heaven and a new Earth, points us in the direction of “both and” instead of “either or.”

If, as I firmly believe, God is calling us to be co-creators of a new Earth, then I also have to believe that far too often good Christian men, and women, have chosen to ignore that call and instead have used Genesis 1:28 to justify taking a different path. In the New Revised Standard translation, the verse reads, *“God blessed them, and God said to them,” “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”* The words translated as “subdue” and “dominion” are the most problematic ones, here, as they have been used to justify the idea that humankind can do whatever we want, when it comes to how we treat our planet and all the life it contains.

We are currently experiencing the fallout resulting from centuries of misuse of this verse; entire species wiped out, oceans choked with plastics, deforestation, millions of tons of carbon dioxide pumped into our atmosphere each and every year, all resulting in devastating changes to our climate.

As a society, we are finally waking up to the enormous damage that we have done, and have allowed to be done, to this planet we all call home. I believe the Message translation of Genesis 1:28 comes closer to capturing what God is commanding us to do, and how we are called to take care of creation. It reads, *“God blessed them. Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”* See how that one phrase, “be responsible,” changes the meaning of the entire passage?

In many circles, working for environmental justice is seen as some hippy dippy thing; something to be sneered at, at best,or in the worst case, something seen as a threat to corporate profits that result from pure greed. And, as is always the case when corporate profits become the primary goal, it’s the poor who are most likely to suffer.

If we accept the premise that God has called us to be co-creators of a new Earth, then what?

I was honored to serve as an Elder Commissioner at the last General Assembly, where I was assigned to serve on the Environmental Justice Committee. Honestly, this wasn’t the committee I wanted to serve on, but you take what your given in these situations. In the week I spent with fellow commissioners, I came to realize that our denomination is dead serious about God’s mandate to care for creation. Our committee spent many long hours debating whether or not the considerable financial assets of the denomination should continue to be invested in oil companies, specifically, as well as other companies which, through their business practices, have contributed to the crisis we face. In the end, the committee recommended divestment of millions of dollars of shares in five major oil companies, in an effort to encourage corporate responsibility; a recommendation that passed the Assembly by an overwhelming margin. The church, in effect, put its money where its mouth is.

The Biblical mandate to care for all of creation extends to us, individually, as well as the church and society, writ large. There are some simple, easy things each of us can do to live into God’s command. A few that come to mind, include recycling, using re-usable bags at the grocery store, (on sale at Brolium’s for a just couple of dollars each) and encouraging manufacturers to us less or environmentally friendly packaging. On a larger scale, we can advocate for laws that reduce carbon emissions, we can sign petitions to encourage passage of legislation that benefit and save endangered species. There are many more ways to make a difference, and I’m sure each of you can think additional ways each of us can work to obey this commandment.

Here’s the bottom line: We only have one planet and it's in crisis, whether we want to admit it or not. God has given the care of this planet, and everything in it, to us. We need to do whatever we can, individually or as part of a larger effort, to work hand in hand with our Creator God to bring about a new Heaven *and* a new Earth, not just for our own benefit, but for all who will come after us. This is what we have been called to do; commanded to do even, by none other than God. May we commit, or recommit, ourselves in our individual lives as well as our communal life, to taking our responsibility to care for all of creation seriously, in obedience to God’s will, AMEN