

“Renewing the Earth”
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April 24, 2016

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

This past Friday was the 46th annual Earth Day, an event which has raised awareness in popular culture about the need to protect the environment. It has become quite a movement, now known as the “the largest secular observance in the world, celebrated by more than a billion people every year.”¹ A billion people is quite impressive, but what does it have to do with us here in the church? What is our role in this “largest secular observance in the world?” Truthfully, Earth Day is just as applicable in the church, with a slightly different emphasis. As Christians, we believe that God is the creator of all things and that we are called to be stewards of God’s creation.

Jennifer Edinger wrote “Our care of creation is an act of worship. And our worship is an act of caring for creation... Worship can be a time to increase our awareness of the world around us, to increase our appreciation of the sacredness of creation, and to deepen our desire to treat it with dignity and respect.”²

In the PC(USA) Book of Order, we read this: “As stewards of God’s creation who hold the earth in trust, the people of God are called to a. use the earth’s resources responsibly without plundering, polluting, or destroying, b. develop technological methods and processes that work together with the earth’s environment to preserve and enhance life, c. produce and consume in ways that make available to all people what is sufficient for life, d. work for responsible attitudes and practices in procreation and reproduction, e. use and shape earth’s goods to create beauty, order, health, and peace in ways that reflect God’s love for all creatures.”³

From the very beginning of the Bible, we read of God’s loving acts of creation. In Genesis 1, we read that God created the earth, its natural beauty and its inhabitants and called them all “good.” God looked at the creation after all had been made, and called it “very good.” However, we have not always taken very good care of what God called “very good.”

Sometimes, we have been led to believe that we are *not* called to care for the earth. There’s a verse very early in the Bible that has been cause of significant debate. It is Genesis 1:28, just after God has created humans: “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.’” It is that part about “subduing” and “dominion” that has caused such debate. This has led some to feel contempt for the earth in its natural state. Earth is seen as something to be tamed, not to be treasured for the beauty, majesty, and mystery of creation. But the next chapter tells a bit more about what we are to do. Genesis 2:15 says we were put into the garden to work the land and *take care of it*. We have

¹ <http://www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day/>

² Care of the Earth: An Environmental Resource Manual for Church Leaders, page 45.

³ Book of Order W-7.5003

dominion over the land, not *domination*. We are given dominion over the land in the same way that we have dominion over our children and God has dominion over us. We are not to abuse our children, or the earth. God has made it very good and we are to care for that very good earth.

We were given stewardship over the land, not truly ownership. Psalm 24 reminds us, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” Jesus continually used examples out of nature in his teaching – fig trees and mustard seeds and sowing seeds, grain and yeast and bread, vineyards and vines and wine, fishing and shepherds and sheep. God made all of the creatures of the world. Yes, God made us last and the Bible depicts us as God’s crowning achievement, but that does not mean that we were made to be separate from the other parts of creation. We were made to be *part* of the world around us, not truly distinct from it. Our modern lifestyle has taken us further and further from the other parts of God’s creation, but we were made to live in harmony with the rest of creation. How many times have you heard someone say that they went out into nature to commune with God? Jesus did the same thing, over and over. Yes, God is everywhere, but there is something about the beauty of nature that enables us to catch glimpses of God at work. Yet, we have not been the stewards of God’s creation that we should be. Often, environmentalism and ecology are subjects discussed only in the secular arena. And way too often, the issue becomes politicized. Let me stress this point: this should *not* be a political issue. This is a Christian issue. “The earth is the Lord’s” and we have no business dishonoring it. In fact, we are specifically called to be taking care of it.

And we do so in community. Jesus did not come just for one of us, but for all of us. We work together in our joys and in our struggles, for we are in this together. There is an old Jewish proverb that tells of a man in a boat who began to drill a hole under his seat. As he did so, his fellow passengers exclaimed in alarm and begged him to stop. He said, “what do you care? I am only drilling under *my* seat!” Clearly, though, what one of us does affects all of those around us. That is true in spiritual matters and in practical matters. What we do to the earth – for better or worse – affects not just us, but everyone.

God made a “very good” creation, and that creation is for our benefit, not for us to devastate. It is interesting to note that creation is not just for our needs – oxygen from trees, food from plants and animals – but for our enjoyment. Genesis 2:9 says, “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is *pleasant* to the sight and good for food...” God built into creation aesthetic beauty so that we could not just survive, but enjoy our world. And the whole of creation cries out in praise of God. Our Psalm today speaks of praise coming from angels, sun and moon, stars, sea monsters, ocean depths, fire, hail, snow, frost, wind, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things, flying birds, kings, all peoples, princes, rulers, young men and women, old and young. In short, *all of creation* sings praises to God. We are just one part of the beauty of God’s creation, and while we were given the task of tending to the creation, we should not view the other parts of creation as unworthy. The Psalmist saw all parts of creation together praising our creator.

Creation care is not just another cause to worry about or to ignore. It is a way of showing love to our loving Creator and to one another. Creation care leads us to deeper understanding that

we are a part of something much greater than ourselves, and that God loves all of creation. It is a chance to participate in the very first task that God gave humans, to lovingly tend the earth.

Today's passage from Revelation is perhaps not one we would often think of in relation to creation care. It is one that we often use at funerals, where we generally focus on the part of the passage which reads "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." These are indeed beautiful promises of hope in a future free from death and crying and pain. This morning, however, I want to focus our attention on other parts of this passage, specifically on the "new earth" prophesied in John's writing. Just how should we understand this future "new earth?" It seems that "new" means something that didn't previously exist. In fact, the first English definition I found for "new" is "not old: recently born, built, or created." So, given that definition, this *new* earth prophesied must be a completely new creation. With that understanding, why should we care for the current earth? If it's going to be gone and completely replaced, then there's really no need to steward the resources of this earth. That seems to be the thinking of some Christians. However, as Barbara Rossing writes "The Greek word used for the 'new' earth in Revelation 21:1 can mean either 'renewed' or 'new'—but it certainly does not mean a 'different' earth. There is no justification for using up the earth on the grounds that we get to trade this one in for a new and bigger one..."⁴ As for "new" in English, a different definition is "made or become fresh." We use this meaning when saying something like "that vacation made me a new person." If we say that, do we mean that we were completely destroyed and replaced? Of course not. The "new" earth promised to us in Revelation 21 is a promise of a *renewed* earth, a transformed, healed, and reconciled earth. God didn't create a world and call it "very good" to destroy it – or to intend for *us* to destroy it, by our action or *inaction*. No, we are called to be stewards of the "very good" earth. We are to be covenant partners with God in the holy task of stewardship of God's creation, a place Revelation calls God's home, where God will dwell among us. Let us work together in partnership with our God to faithfully conserve the wonders of the earth God lovingly made for us, giving us food to eat and beauty to gaze upon, nourishment for our bodies and our souls. Thanks be to God for the wonder of creation. Amen

⁴ *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, p. 7