

New Heaven! New Earth!

A Dialogue Sermon for Earth Day

Matt: Today's sermon is intended to be a celebration of the New Heaven and the New Earth that John of Patmos talks about in the New Testament book of Revelation. Let us pray: As a child rests in his mother's arms so may I rest in you . . .

Rachel: Listen for the word of God:

Revelation 21:1-6 1Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

Matt: Last week Rachel and I missed worshipping with you in person. We missed wishing you Happy Mother's Day.

Rachel: Happy Mother's Day!

M: And we missed music Sunday. Isn't our choir great? (You can clap.)

R: Matt and I live-streamed part of the service driving home through Western North Carolina; the music was wonderful. Later in our trip, driving over bumpy roads in Indiana, we listened to the Eric's sermon.

M: We are glad to be back home with you.

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R: John of Patmos, who wrote the book of Revelation, which scares some of us (but isn't meant to), wrote to the early church a coded letter of comfort.

M: The fledging church was in a season of transition and growth; they thought of heaven as a faraway world.

R: Rome was a terrible threat to the church. Emperor Domitian was a cruel, ruthless, and paranoid tyrant. He dealt harshly with Christians and Jews.

M: It was in this troubled context that John writes about his vision of a New Heaven and a New Earth, of how things would turn out in the end, *and of how things were turning out now*.

R: John was writing about heaven, our ultimate victory after our earthy death. When you live in danger, heaven is a faraway world for which to hope and to dream.

M: But John isn't just writing about some distant, faraway future. We are living into that future in the here-and-now. Right now!

M & R: God reigns—

M: we need be afraid of no earthly emperor.

M & R: God reigns in power—

M: and no earthy power need intimidate us.

M & R: God reigns—

M: and his son, the humble Christ, born of human flesh, taught, loved, healed, died, and rose again. Death has power, but life has more.

R: John was telling persecuted Christians to hold fast, to have hope and courage, to trust God, and to celebrate and claim the New Creation that has dawned right now in Jesus Christ.

M: Listen to this good news:

R: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . .

M: John is telling the church that God rules an empire greater than Rome. And that God has chosen to abide with us (right now) by the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

R: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them . . .”

M: Alleluia.

R: “. . . God will wipe every tear from their eyes . . .”

M: Alleluia.

R: “. . . Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

M: It’s a vision of a new heaven.

R: And it’s a vision of a new earth that we are to claim, live into, work on, and make happen—according to God’s will—by our own hands, here and now.

M: John’s vision helps us better see how we are to live life right now.

R: We worship a God who makes “all things new.” So, we do our part to protect and nurture the world in which God’s beloved community lives.

R&M: A new heaven. A new earth.

R: We are called to take care of the whole cosmos that God created.

M: We are benefactors of a new heaven and a new earth. We are stewards of creation.

R: But we all wear blinders, and sometimes we fail to notice the world around us.

M: We fail to notice and to acknowledge our brothers and sisters. This is called sin. Listen to these words from our Brief Statement of Faith:

R: Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

M: God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation, and God expects the church to do its part . . .

R: Last week the community gathered to walk through neighborhoods on the North Side handing out bags with information about deterring violence. It was particularly timely given last week's murder of 8th grader Elijah Booker.

We must do more than wring out hands about this violence; we need to support our neighbors who live in what some say is becoming a battle ground. The North Side is part of God's new heaven and new earth, and those neighbors are our next of kin.

M: Part of being alive means paying attention to the community around us. Living in it. Loving it. Praying for it. Growing friendships in it.

M&R: A new heaven. A new earth.

M: We often fail to notice our God-given neighbors and our God-given world. You might not know this, but our congregation is an Earth Care Congregation, which means we have a team that pays attention to caring for our environment.

R: They work to educate us. They care for our church grounds by planting flowers that are beautiful and attract butterflies. They engage in outreach and advocacy over environmental issues. They encourage us to use real plates and cups, and when we use throw-away items, they are easily biodegradable. They take seriously the New Heaven and the New Earth entrusted to our care.

M: Ask them about their work. (Would the Environmental Stewardship Committee please stand. You can clap). God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation, and God expects the church to do its part . . .

R: Our Environmental Stewardship Committee is doing its part. A new garden that includes pollinator beds has been planted. Little Blue Stems, pale purple Cone flowers, purple joe pie weed, Sunflowers, prairie drop seed, pale-eyed susans. We're going to have a billion butterflies on our campus thanks to the vision, the work, and the care of our "Green Team." They revel in the small patches of grass we have on our campus. They care for, protect, and celebrate creation.

R: This morning, listen again to how the Psalmist celebrated creation.

M: Praise the Lord!

**R: Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise God in the heights!**

Praise God, all his angels;

praise God, all his host!

Praise God, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise God, you highest heavens,

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,

for he commanded and they were created.

God established them forever and ever;

God fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the Lord from the earth,

**you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!**

Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

**Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!**

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

**Young men and women alike,
old and young together!**

M: Let them praise the name of the Lord,

**R: for God's name alone is exalted;
God's glory is above earth and heaven.**

M: When's the last time you stopped to praise God for the sacred ties of our community, and for the gorgeous beauty of creation?

R: How many times do you and I fail to notice the earth God has entrusted to our care?

M: Spring time is like a great awakening. Trees and flowers are coming back to life. Listen to how the poet Paul Fleischman celebrates the simple grasshopper:

(*Grasshoppers*, Paul Fleischman, *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, HarperTrophy, 1988.)

Sap's rising
Ground's warming
Grasshoppers are hatching out
Autumn-laid eggs
Splitting
Young stepping
Into spring
Grasshoppers hopping
High
Grass jumpers jumping
Far

Vaulting from leaf to leaf stem to stem
 Leaf to leaf
Plant to plant
 Stem to stem
 Grass-leapers
Grass bounders
 Grass-springers
Grass soarers
Leapfrogging
Long jumping
Grasshoppers.

M: And the firefly:

(*Fireflies*, Paul Fleishchman, Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices, HarperTrophy, 1988.)

Light
 Is the ink we use
Night
 Is our parchment
 We're fireflies
 Fireflies
 Flickering
 Flitting
 Flashing
 Fireflies glimmering
 Fireflies gleaming
 Glowing
Insect calligraphers
 Practicing penmanship
 Copying sentences
Six-legged scribblers
 Of vanishing messages
 Fleeting graffiti
Fine artists in flight
 Adding dabs of light
 Bright brush strokes
Signing the June nights as if they were paintings
 We're
 Flickering
 Fireflies
 Fireflies
 Flickering
Fireflies.

R: I encourage you, church, this week to slow down and notice each other. Listen out for the crickets. Seek the fireflies and the moths flitting around the porch light, the flowers, the fragrance, the spring that is springing. Pay attention to the people around you and the world around you. These are gifts of God to be celebrated, cared for, treasured, and enjoyed. God has gifted us with . . .

M&R: A new heaven. A new earth.

M: May God hear our prayer,

R: and may we live our prayer:

M: O "God of land and sky and sea,
R: "God of life and destiny,
M: "God of great and God of small,
R: "God of one and God of all . . .
M&R: alleluia, alleluia, praise be to your name."¹

¹ *God of Great and God of Small*, Natalie Sleeth, 1973, **Glory to God Hymnal**, 7.7.7.7 with refrain.

