

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, April 24, 2016**  
**Text: Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35**

# An Earthly Hope



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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In the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Revelation we hear it all come together, the culminating vision that sets everything right. The wicked city of Babylon is replaced by the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It is as if we are the groom standing at the altar, and we look back to see the bride being ushered down the aisle by God. This dream-come-true is a blessing; the old curse is lifted. It is a promise of a new life to be cherished, not a future to fear. It is the hope of Isaiah realized, the yearning of Ezekiel come true. And a loud voice proclaims, "See, the home of God is among mortals." The "tabernacle" of God is among the "anthropoi," the root for "anthropology," among all the people collectively. This is a communal vision of salvation, not individual, and it takes place on earth, not in heaven.

That should serve as a balance to much of the popular apocalyptic preaching in our culture today. Among the loudest voices are those who cry out that salvation belongs to any one of us individually who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I was confronted with that when I was a sophomore here at the university. "You want to be saved? Here is the Jesus prayer you need to pray, and here is the pamphlet that tells you how to do it. Just say these words and you will be among God's chosen ones." When I demurred, the young soldier for Christ accused me of being a "submarine Christian," lurking below the surface, unwilling to be seen as faithful by others. The whole motif of the "left behind" books and movies of a few decades ago was that Jesus will return and swoop away up to heaven the faithful individuals and leave behind all of the sinners. I got the sense, as the evangelists described the "saved," that I would be left behind, and I suspect I would not be left alone here in this sanctuary.

I had a clergy colleague decades ago that was so sure that he would be beamed heavenward at the Second Coming of Christ that he always wore a jumpsuit. He wanted to be appropriately clothed to make the trip . . . no sport jacket to flap in the breeze, no shirt to come untucked, no belt to get snagged on the way up. He had them in liturgical colors . . . purple for Lent, white for Easter, red for Pentecost, green for the common time of the Church calendar. When he died and was buried, like all of us will be, with our feet facing east so that when Jesus comes again we will spring from the grave facing the right way, I wonder what color jumpsuit was on his body.

Oh, I parody that premonition of the final hope for humanity, and yet there is warrant for it in the Bible. There are the texts which people can quote about Jesus coming back to claim the souls and bodies of the faithful and heading up to heaven. But here in the Book of Revelation is the final vision contained in the Bible, and it has salvation moving in the other direction . . . from heaven down to earth. It is an earthly hope that is presented to us as the defining act of God. "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And 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.'"

If this earth is the place of God's ultimate saving act, then we had better take better care of it. Friday was Earth Day, the 46<sup>th</sup> annual celebration of the earth's goodness started by Governor Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. This state has a sterling history of championing the conservation of our natural surroundings. John Muir, the young man from a farm in Marquette County fleeing to Madison to escape an abusive father, and then out west to explore every crag and cave of California, he writes, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

Frank Lloyd Wright, a Badger of sorts, said this, now inscribed on an interior wall of the Monona Terrace, "Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you," as he designed buildings that would fit into their natural surroundings.

And, of course, Aldo Leopold, who took over a run-down sand farm along the Wisconsin River up near Baraboo and brought it back to life, and then wrote about it in A Sand County Almanac. It had been the norm for farmers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to farm the land to death, leeching it of all of its nutrients, and then simply abandoning it and moving on west, "The Westward Expansion," we nobly called it. Leopold took over land abused by greed and stupidity and restored it best he could. He was not unrealistic; he knew that some of the native grasses and flowers were gone forever, but he worked to give the burr oaks their space, the cranes their habitat, and eventually even the predators their rightful place in the scheme of things.

He did not theologize, but he got the divine vision right when he wrote in the foreword, "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land." Here he refers, I think, to the mistaken notion that when God said to Adam and Eve to take the earth and "subdue" it, that God meant we could possess it to do anything we want to it. No, the word is best translated to "serve" the earth, to care for it. Leopold continues, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture." The land yielding a cultural harvest when we see it as a community to which we belong rather than a commodity which belongs to us.

Next month the international body calling itself The United Methodist Church, of which we are a part, will meet for its quadrennial session in Portland, Oregon. It has a thousand pages of business before it. In the stack of legislation is a

resolution that echoes Leopold's view of the land as community, not commodity. "The natural world is a loving gift from God, the creator and sustainer, who has entrusted it in all its fullness to the care of all people for God's glory and to the good of all life on earth now and in the generations to come. The image of God in us (Gen.1:27) is reflected in our abilities, responsibilities, and integrity, and with the power of the Holy Spirit we are called as God's co-workers in dialogue and covenant to live and serve for the good of creation." This is consistent with the promise of a new heaven and a new earth found in Revelation 21, asserts the resolution.

An earthly hope . . . we heal the earth, and the earth heals us. When my parents died within a year of each other now over two decades ago, I found it very hard, disorienting. Their deaths were "natural," by all definitions, but they were my parents. And without them the world seemed strangely diminished. I had never known the world without them. As far as I knew, they had been there since the beginning of time. God created the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth, the oceans, and then Barney and Ethel.

The one thing I found most soothing was to walk over to the shore of Lake Michigan, just a few blocks from where we lived in the parsonage in Wilmette north of Chicago, walk past the pine shrubs that smelled just like those near my grandparents' home near the beach of Lake Erie west of Vermillion, Ohio, step over the wind-blown ridge of sand and lie in the grass where all I could hear was the rhythmic sound of the waves. A fluid surge, followed by a grainy retreat, six small waves and then a larger one, a pattern repeated over and over until my breathing mimicked the waves. The healing balm of waves on the beach.

I went there as often as I could, while still trying to keep up the work at the church, after all, it was this time of the year with Pentecost coming and Confirmation on the schedule, and the end-of-the-season board meetings, and soon our Annual Conference. After about two months of me occasionally seeking solace listening to the waves, I told the church council members how restorative it was for me and how much I still needed it. One of the members said, "Well, Phil, truthfully we think it is time for you to focus on work again."

I had been working hard! I had not taken a day off all spring. I just needed to get in touch with the world, with the creation, with the natural rhythms, with myself. But it was seen as self-indulgent by those around me. Not that I still feel the wounds 22 years later! But in our culture we give people three days to mourn – the day of death, the day of making arrangements, the day of the funeral, and then it is off with the black drape and back at the desk. The best advice I ever got in this regard was from a hospice worker whom I never met but talked to on the phone soon after Dad died, "No one will give you the time you need to mourn. Take it, anyway."

An earthly hope: heal the earth, and the earth heals you. One of the lesser known gems of early Methodism was a tiny book John Wesley wrote entitled, Primitive Physick. It is a compendium of natural health remedies that he gathered from many sources and gave to his itinerant preachers who went out into every corner of Great Britain and Ireland on horseback. Now imagine, there was no health care for anyone unless you were very wealthy and lived in a city. Down the lanes and cow paths of the countryside the people had nothing to turn to for remedies except the things that grew around them. So, Wesley, a scientist at heart, made this the second volume the preachers carried, the first being the Bible.

Some of the advice still is valid today. For a bruise quickly apply cold water to keep it from swelling. Eat judiciously, get a lot of exercise, apply honey to a bee sting to take the pain away. He seemed to think that taking a cold bath would cure most anything, and he was very interested in the impact of electric shocks and magnetic power.

Some of his advice is a bit more suspect. To counteract asthma cut up an ounce of liquorice into small pieces and steep in water for 24 hours, and then drink it. To cure baldness rub the scalp morning and evening with onions, followed by honey. And if you suffer from scurvy, live on turnips for a month.

Okay, so we learn some things about nature over time that change our views. When I was a child the truck spraying DDT would come down Gilbert Street and all of us kids would run out into the cloud to jump around and play. It was as if the ice cream man had come. We know better now. I heard an ad from a lawyer giving us an 800 number to call if we have developed ovarian cancer from baby powder. Really? And yet talc, untreated, has asbestos in it. Now as we drive around the countryside we see the farmers out plowing the fields, spreading fertilizer, and soaking the ground with great, elongated sprayers, and it causes us to wonder, "What are they adding to the soil? What do we need to know to be sure that we are healing the earth, not abusing it in order to get a quicker, greater harvest? Where are the bees, the butterflies, the meadowlarks, the meadowlarks that used to serenade from the telephone wires along the country roads?

When Jesus tells his disciples to love one another, that love which is the ultimate act resulting in human wellbeing, that love which is the tie that binds us to each other, we also see in the context of the culminating vision from the Book of Revelation that it is that love which binds us to all of creation. The community of love envisioned by the seer John, this new Jerusalem, is on earth, and it includes all of God's peoples. And in that vision is healing, healing of the earth, healing of us.

"To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life," the voice from heaven declares. Water, more vital than oil, more valuable than gold. Hike down from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon to the Colorado River way below, passing from the pine forests on top through several ecological zones to the desert floor. Cross the river

on a suspension footbridge. Spend two nights at the bunk house at Phantom Ranch next to the river so that you have a day to hike on the path that heads north from the river. If you were to walk all the way along this path eventually you would climb way up to the North Rim. Do not do that. Rather, walk slowly and take it all in . . . the cacti, the low bushes, the lizards, the rocks and dirt, and a small stream flowing to your right.

You take a couple of sips from your canteen; be sure to take it along, with your broad-brimmed hat and your neckerchief. And then, you hear it, a sound in the distance that is uncertain. As you walk farther it begins to sound like water, falling water. And then, there it is just around a bend in the path – a waterfall cascading down from a cliff about 30 feet high, a waterfall in the desert, water traveling all the way from the temperate climate of the North Rim, heaven-sent, in a way. You walk over to it, lay aside your gear and anything of value, and stand under it. Drenched by the water of life, a gift; there is healing in that water, a balm for us, a sign of God's love. What a vision; what a salvation. Amen.