

GOIN' GREEN: REJOICE  
Revelation 21:1-6a

Today we are wrapping up our series on Goin' Green. We began talking about what it means to be a "green church" by repenting from ways that don't enhance creation and how we can reclaim our role as stewards or caretakers of creation. We have not only looked at, but are actively finding ways at how we can reuse, reduce and recycle as biblical responses to caring for the environment. Today is the day we rejoice! This might seem an odd response seeing as we are not exactly where we need to be when it comes to taking care of creation. This past week at our FOCUS team meeting, someone pointed out that we still use paper plates and plastic silverware when we have a kitchen with silverware and plates that could be reused. So it appears we aren't finished yet ... we have more work to do, so what's to rejoice about?

There is a refrain in the popular Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". Can you sing it with me? "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

A Sunday School teacher asked her students where God lived. After the usual answers of heaven and in my heart, Bobby spoke up and said, "God lives in the bathroom at our house!" "Why the bathroom?" inquired the teacher. "I don't know," responded Bobby. "I only know that my Dad gets up every morning and beats on the bathroom door where my sister is taking forever to get ready for school and says, 'My God, are you still in there?' God lives in the bathroom at our house."

So where does God live at our house? Is God on the front porch looking in or locked in the bathroom trying to get out? As the Apostle John surveyed the glory of heaven and the happenings of earth in the Book of Revelation, he makes this astounding discovery. “The dwelling of God is with people!” Eugene Peterson in “The Message” puts it this way: “Look, look, God has moved into the neighborhood, making His home with men and women. They’re His people. He’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes and make everything new.” Rejoicing affirms our faith in the promises of God and our role as stewards or co-creators with God.

Yet this morning’s reading tells us that one day God will create a new heaven and new earth, so if that is the case, why do we bother going green ... why even talk about environmental stewardship? Can’t we just sit here and wait for God to take care of it someday? Former US Secretary of the Interior expressed a similar sentiment: “We don’t have to protect the environment, the Second Coming is at hand.” When my children were young one of their jobs from a very early age was to make their bed in the morning. At one time or another each one would ask why we have to make our beds since we will just be undoing it again at night.

The apostle Paul anticipated a similar “why bother” response from his audience when he spoke to them about eternal life in Christ: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Romans 6:1-2).

As caretakers of the creation, we are co-creators with God, fellow workers with the Lord. The creation is waiting in eager expectation, not for

divine redemption but for “the reappearing of the children of God.” Somehow, God is working out renewal for the created order through us. For that reason, we are to be “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Bishop N.T. Wright, a noted biblical scholar explains Paul’s underlying meaning this way: “That you do in the present ... by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself .. will last into God’s future. This future, God’s future, is what he calls, “life after life after death.” We will then enjoy resurrected life with Jesus in the new heavens and the new earth, the restored creation. Another way of saying it is that if Christ is in our being, we will be active participants in doing.

Rebekah Simon Peter shares in her book “Green Church”, that our collective vision of this restored creation began on Christmas Eve 1968. The Apollo 8 spacecraft circled the moon to scout out landing sites for the upcoming Apollo 11 mission that would eventually place the first man on the moon. It was an awesome moment as the astronauts saw Earth, a brilliant blue and white globe rising out of the dark, formless void of space. Mission commander Frank Borman even read from the Book of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

That moment was photographed and titled “Earth Rise”. It literally changed human consciousness forever. Although we had been on our way to explore the moon, for the first time ever we saw Earth.

The same kind of love with which God loves the cosmos began to well up in us. Taylor Wang, a scientist who flew the 1983 Spacelab Mission said, “A Chinese tale tells of some men sent to harm a young girl who, upon seeing her beauty, become her protectors rather than her violators.” Wang continued, “That’s how I felt seeing the Earth for the first time. I could not help but love and cherish her.” Edgar Mitchell, the sixth person to walk on the moon said, “We went to the Moon as technicians; we returned as humanitarians.”

Earth Rise, the experience of one moment, also changed our theology or how we speak about God. Church missions started taking on a new note of cross-cultural respect. Interreligious dialogue began and even scripture was being read with new eyes. What was discovered as we flew in the heavens, walked on the moon, and set our sights on Mars is that our consciousness expanded and so did our theology.

We look again at the promises of a new heaven and a new earth, and we see something we never saw before: it is not a vision of life after death that takes place up there somewhere; it is a vision of life after life after death. This is the resurrection the ancients envisioned happening right here on earth. In other words, salvation is not so much going to heaven when we die, but about heaven coming to earth. Salvation includes a profound harmony with God, the creation and one another. This isn’t something

new, we say it each week as we pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

As we journey forward we need to remember to always REJOICE! Although at times the work before us appears to be demanding, it will call us to our best selves.

Today, this Sunday, is the day we pledge for the 2012 budget. We have choice to commit ... to participate ... to co-create the future of St. James UMC. Someone asked me this morning where a copy of our new budget is in order to offer a pledge. This year we are doing something new, we are shedding the old snake skin that Chrissy talked about during children’s time. This year we are asking you to pledge not according to what is on a sheet of paper, this year we are asking that you pledge from your heart. What is this place, our ministries here, worth to you?

This past year we have had many expenses and it hasn’t always been easy doing what needed to be done. But by the grace of God, we have made it through another budget year. That good news is that even when it seems that the road is long and progress is hard to come by, remember that “in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.” Somehow, God is using us to free the creation from the bondage of decay. Let the JOY of that promise pull us and the creation, forward into God’s good future! Amen.