

This past Friday was Earth Day; and while it's not a distinctively religious observance, many faith traditions and houses of worship embrace and celebrate Earth Day as part of their larger efforts toward creation stewardship. For Christians and Jews who include the book of Genesis in their sacred scriptures, God created the earth and then, having made human beings in the Divine image, gave us a mandate to "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" (1:28).

What that means is that God asked his human creatures to "lord it" over the earth; in other words, to be his – the Lord's - agents in caring for the creation. But all too often humanity, especially in the last couple of hundred years, has taken to using and abusing earth's resources for our own gain, with little regard for the well-being of the earth itself or of those who come after us. We're seeing the results of that neglect in our own time: extinct and endangered species, climate change, pollution, devastated ecosystems. Sadly, Christians seem divided on this. There are some who point to this very verse from Genesis as license to neglect the care of the planet, and who point to certain passages in the Revelation to John to indicate that God is going to destroy and/or renew the earth anyway, so it really doesn't matter much what we do to our planet. There are Christians who feel that too much emphasis on caring for earth leads to making an idol of the planet, and a goddess out of Mother Nature. And there are some who truly strive to practice stewardship of all creation. Regardless of what we've become or what we're capable of doing, it was never God's intention to destroy the earth. It shouldn't be ours either. Yet it seems that we Christians have somewhat complicated and divergent beliefs regarding the earth we live on.

But if we have complicated and divergent beliefs regarding earth, these are nothing regarding our beliefs concerning heaven. Part of this has to do with the fact that our scriptural ideas and our theological constructs regarding the afterlife are not always consistent. And so we wonder: What is heaven, really? Is it really up in the sky somewhere, a place where God lives with the angels and saints? Just what and who is it for, and what, exactly, must we do to get in? And perhaps most confusing of all, when does that happen: immediately upon death, or at the resurrection on the last day?

Not only that, we've set up a dichotomy between earth and heaven: *earth* is evil, **heaven** is good; *earth* is the realm of empire, where human sin is an active and ever-present force, while **heaven** is the realm of God; *earth* is vile and violent and temporary, while **heaven** is pristine and peaceful and eternal. Some look toward **heaven** as a place where the misery of life on *earth* can and will be forgotten; given the way some folks are forced to live, that's not all that surprising. Many of us were raised to believe that the most important, if not the only reason for living a Christian life was so that we can go to heaven when we die. For centuries, the church focused on coaching its members on how to live in such a way that heaven was attainable at death. In spite of what the Lord's Prayer says, or what Jesus himself preached, there was little if any emphasis on God's kingdom coming on earth, or on trying to make the world over according to God's gracious design.

When you think about it, that's a pretty selfish view of faith and of God's purpose. In fact, Christians historically have spent so much time focused on heaven that we often forget that God seeks to redeem and renew both heaven and earth, not destroy earth at the end of human history.

Revelation is a much misunderstood book, and it can be a scary book; it's certainly been used that way. But those who preach "Left Behind" and all those frightening end-times scenarios aren't telling the whole story. Redemption and renewal have been God's aim all along, ever since disobedience and rejection of God's love set creation on its sorry course and made that redemption necessary. The final portion of Revelation is a beautiful description of what existence will be like when the reign of God reaches fulfillment. It's a different sort of promise than many of us are used to hearing. Yes, the first earth - not the planet so much as the way we live on it - will pass away, but then so too will the first heaven - everything, *absolutely everything*, gets renewed.

Then, we're told, God will come and make a home here. "...the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God...and God himself will be with them." Translated literally, the words used for *home* and *dwell* here actually mean "tenting" or "tabernacling"; it's the same word used in the beginning of John's gospel: "And the word become flesh and *lived* or *dwelt*, that is, 'tented' or 'tabernacled' among us."

There's a wonderful continuity about God's presence among humanity that pervades our scriptures; it's an ongoing, constant thing. Going all the way back to Genesis, remember: God has always sought out humanity as agents in God's plan. From the forming of a nation, God's chosen, covenant people through Abraham, to the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, to the prophets, to Jesus himself, and the Church throughout the ages. We may have fallen, and we may continue to fall, but we never, ever fall so far that God gives up on us and stops seeking us out as partners. It's a beautiful image, and a hopeful one, isn't it? God living among us; what could possibly be a more certain blessing than that?

So, what if heaven isn't actually a place we go to? What if God's eternal home becomes a place where God comes to meet us, in God's good and gracious time, and not the other way around? Might that impact how we live on earth now, all the while anticipating God's renewal of all of creation?

That means we have a choice (as we always do); as individuals, yes, but more particularly as the church, which is God's instrument on earth. We can cooperate with God in God's mission to restore creation, not just mean in terms of ecology, but also of society, whether it's restoring the dignity of the planet itself, or restoring the dignity of every human being. God doesn't want us to escape into an interior faith that's all about us and ignores the public dimension of that Divine-human partnership. God doesn't want us to sit idly by and wait and worry; God wants us to work for the kingdom,

Revelation was written as a reassurance to the earliest Christians, who were being persecuted by the empire of Rome, which in the book is referred to as "Babylon", which of course was another empire under which God's people had suffered. And it wasn't just Christians who were

oppressed by this empire; Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities suffered, too. It had become a way of life, just as it's a way of life for so many in our modern world.

Revelation holds God's promise that that whole way of life - suffering and injustice and oppression and persecution - will all pass away. And just as Jesus' resurrection proves that sin and death won't have the last word, this book's closing chapters give us a portrait of that new heaven and a new earth that God has promised us, a place where tears are wiped away; where death, mourning, crying, and pain are no more. Friends, those are promises that hold, and they always will.