

“A New Heaven & Earth NOW!”
C Easter 5; Revelation 21:1-6
May 19, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

21 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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.

He will dwell^[b] with them;

they will be his peoples,^[c]

and God himself will be with them;^[d]

⁴ he 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.”

⁵ And 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.” ⁶ Then 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.

I. NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH? NOW?

Imagine. Imagine with me for a few moments what “a new heaven and a new earth” are like. Where the Holy is living among mortals, the old things have passed away and “behold, Creator Spirit is making everything new.”

For, this is not a pipedream. Not a “pie in the sky when you die” pretty, but impossible vision from a dusty old book called the Bible.

This is about now! The “now and the not yet” as the poets and songwriters like to say. Not some description of “when the Rapture comes and all the good people go to Heaven!” Or, when we ourselves die, this is what life will look like in Heaven. Or, “when my ship comes in, glory, glory!”

This is a **promise** – made by our Maker to us, in the ancient words of scripture, and it is now. And we have a part in making it come to fruition –now.

Bruce Epperly: “The words of Revelation speak of the world as it is **meant to be**. The eschatology of Revelation invites us to ethical embodiment. *We* are challenged to be part of wiping every tear or, at least, minimizing needless pain. *We* are challenged to seek a world where pain and death are no more or, at least, minimize our perpetuation of deathful

situations. We currently don't live in such an idyllic world, but we can begin to act as if it is coming and ultimately our destiny; seeking to make our lives holy "on earth as it is in heaven."

God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. This new creation will bring unity to the whole earth, and break down every barrier humans create."

So, imagine with me. What does a new heaven on earth, look like, *now*? Around us, among us, with, for and by our efforts to love God, the earth and one another?

II. MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE THIS?

a) Sitting down at the Table

Three young men from Alabama learned a valuable lesson or two when they sat down for dinner with an elderly stranger (they are black and she is white.)

The men were waiting for their food at Brad's in Oxford, Alabama when they spotted the woman dining solo. One, named Howard, said on Facebook: "My exact thought was, 'Dang I'd hate to have to eat alone, so after thinking about it a minute I walked over to her and asked if I could sit with her.'"

The woman said yes and the two started talking. "After a while of talking she told me she lost her husband and that tomorrow would have been their 60th anniversary," Howard wrote. "I instantly gave my

condolences and asked her to come eat with us, which she was excited to do."

They snapped a picture, which viral on the internet, and shared all that they learned in this brief encounter.

Howard, one of the men, reflected later:

"The point in this is always be kind and be nice to people. You never know what they are going through." (He said the woman changed his outlook on life and how he looks at other people.) "Everyone has a story so do not judge! And people, I can't stress this enough. GO SEE YOUR MOM AND YOUR GRANDPARENTS. They *miss* you!"

A new heaven on earth looks like strangers from different walks of life, race, and generation coming to the table together to share life. Holy Fellowship.

b) Couple Spends 20 Years Planting an Entire Forest and Animals Have Returned

Nearly 30 years ago, Brazilian photojournalist **Sebastião Ribeiro Salgado** returned from East Africa, where he was on location documenting the horrors of the Rwanda genocide. Following this traumatizing project, Salgado was to take over his family's sprawling cattle ranch in Minas Gerais—a region he remembered as a lush and lively rainforest. Unfortunately, the area had undergone a drastic transformation; only about 0.5% was covered in trees, and all of the wildlife had disappeared. "The land," he tells *The Guardian*, "was as sick as I was."

Then, his wife Lélia had an idea: they should replant the forest. In order to support this seemingly impossible cause, the couple set up the Instituto Terra, an “environmental organization dedicated to the sustainable development of the Valley of the River Doce,” in 1998. Over the next several years, the Salgados and the Instituto Terra team slowly but surely rebuilt the **1,754-acre forest**, transforming it from a barren plot of land to a tropical paradise.

Now a Private Natural Heritage Reserve, hundreds of species of flora and fauna call the former cattle ranch home. In addition to 293 species of trees, the land now teems with 172 species of birds, 33 species of mammals, and 15 species of amphibians and reptiles—many of which are **endangered**.

As expected, this rejuvenation has also had a huge impact on the ecosystem and climate. On top of reintroducing plants and animals to the area, the project has rejuvenated several once dried-up springs in the drought-prone area, and has even positively affected local temperatures.

Ultimately—and perhaps most unexpectedly—this major feat has saved more than the local landscape. “All the insects and birds and fish returned,” Salgado shares, “and, thanks to this increase of the trees, I, too, was reborn—this was the most important moment.”

A new earth looks like the old earth and its inhabitants reborn.

c) “How one man repopulated a rare butterfly species in his backyard

For centuries the beautiful butterfly thrived in San Francisco Bay Area. But as the region became increasingly urbanized in the early 1900s, the pipevine swallowtail began to disappear. Today it’s an extremely *rare* sight.

Aquatic biologist Tim Wong at the California Academy of Sciences has made it his personal mission to bring the butterfly back, and he’s off to a very promising start.

In 2012, he set out on a quest to find California pipevine, the pipevine swallowtail’s sole food source, which had disappeared in tandem with the butterfly in the city.

“Finally, I was able to find this plant in the San Francisco Botanical Garden,” Wong tells Vox.com. “And they allowed me to take a few clippings of the plant.”

Wong propagated the plant in his backyard, weeding, watering and tending it until he had created a pipevine swallowtail paradise.

“I built a large screen enclosure to protect the butterflies and to allow them to mate under outdoor environmental conditions — natural sun, airflow, temp fluctuations,” he says.

Where once there were none, Wong began to have hundreds, and then thousands of butterflies. They had perfect habitat and food for them to thrive—right there in his backyard and they started multiplying like crazy! He exchanges them with the botanical gardens back and forth now, and the potential for continued growth is unlimited.

“Improving habitat for native fauna is something anyone can do,” Wong says. “Conservation and stewardship can start in your very own backyard.”

d) Brand audits

A Filipino man named Grate took conservation and stewardship in his own backyard to another level, when he realized that his beloved backyard was drowning in a sea of plastic and just reducing his own plastic use was *not* going to stem the tide.

When the corporations responsible for producing the mass of non-recyclable packaging – McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Proctor & Gamble, to name a few, were completely unwilling to talk about the problem or look for solutions, Grate and his team started taking pictures of the plastic trash *with* the brand names/logos fully displayed, and publishing those pictures all over the world.

Well, *that* got their attention! This non-violent resistance –Grate calls it a “brand audit,” garnered an invitation to Washington to talk with the companies and spur on *much* better commitment to reducing plastic production and seeking recyclable alternatives. Sometimes, public embarrassment will speak much louder than moral and ethical pleas!

We can *all* do brand audits. Right here in our daily lives. Avoid the companies that hurt the earth and work against human rights. Support the ones with ethical, sustainable practices and fair labor policies.

Just yesterday I learned that Walmart was a big donor to the anti-abortion atrocities in Alabama, while Patagonia took *their* \$10M tax cut given to corporations last year by the government and donated it to caring for, and saving the planet.

As much as I like the lower prices at Walmart, I know their labor practices and human rights record are bleak and not in line with my faith values. I may have to “just say no.” Put aside the old ways in order to find the new heaven and earth.

We make choices every day that move us toward a new heaven and earth or keep us stuck in a destructive, dependent spiral.

e) Right here, in our neighborhood

Right here, at CUCC, in BV, we can look around and see signs of a new heaven and new earth.

*Great teams and good energy and a sense of new life and passion for ministry. New ideas for activities and endeavors by and with the church – for ourselves and in our wider community.

* Community/CUCC Clean-upon July 21!

*Sister churches and community organizations working collaboratively together.

*Chaffee Green and CUCC working on a composting site.

*Conservancy helping us discover, educate about, and protect the habitat for rare species living in our midst!

*CPFS and CUCC co-sponsoring educational events on important and timely topics.

*Our Backpack program thriving and demonstrating how religious and secular groups can work together in life-giving ways.

*Bridge-building conversations are being explored.

III. THOSE WHO GIVE A DARN

John Pavlovitz, who spoke here Thursday night, suggests that the world, in its divisive character these days, is not divided along political, racial, financial, national or identity lines nearly as much as we think.

The core schism in our creation, he says, is the gulf between those with **empathy** who care about the well-being and equality of other people, and those who don't.

Those who consider all persons a beloved child of God deserving of life, liberty and happiness, and those who consider some “lesser than” or their needs not as important as mine.

Pavlovitz calls these people the “Darn-Givers.” Well, almost. 😊

In a glimpse at what Jesus might be saying to us today, now, he takes us to a hillside where Jesus sits down to speak. Hear these words of Jesus to us:

Be diligent and listen carefully in these days.

Those who give a darn will be My clear, gentle voice cutting through a cacophony of resounding gong and clanging cymbal Christians, letting the outsiders and the invisible and the oppressed know that they are welcomed and seen and loved.

They will be the unapologetic carriers of the common good news; joy and rest for the poor, and the powerless, and those once pushed to the periphery.

Do not be fooled. Those who give a darn will not have it easy here. They will face the slings and arrows and incendiary sermons of those privileged, coddled, and entitled few who do not want the ground leveled; those who will fight like mortally wounded animals because they see diversity as a threat and equality as oppression.

But you who would follow after me need to keep going—because goodness is needed most when bad men have the greatest power.

Those who love me will be those whose lives yield compassion and mercy, whose actions welcome in peace and usher in justice, those who care for others as much as they care for themselves.

Blessed are the darn-givers—for they will bring Heaven down to earth.

And after he had finished speaking, many were overjoyed and moved to tears.

There was great jubilation and dancing.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own—Cardinal Deardon

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is

complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

AMEN.