

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Behold, a New Creation

Isaiah 65:17-25

When I arrived here at the church last Monday morning, I spotted a big metallic green bug on the sidewalk leading up to the office entrance. Sadly, it was lying on its back, its legs frantically pushing against the air in a vain attempt to gain some traction and make some progress. Using a small stick, I was able to flip it over and nudge it toward the mulch, where it regained its bearings and headed off into what was left of the daffodils. I suppose I could look at that episode as a small contribution to the observance of Earth Day, which was on Wednesday. Or perhaps I could see it as an expression of repentance for countless other times when I've stepped on, swatted, sprayed, or squashed a variety of insects.

Maybe some of you had your own ways of acknowledging or celebrating Earth Day. The roots of the observance go back to 1969, when the name "Earth Day" was first introduced at a United Nations conference on the environment. The next year, Gaylord Nelson, a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, led in organizing an environmental teach-in, held on April 22. The day included coast-to-coast rallies and peaceful demonstrations calling for environmental reform, and eventually contributed to the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, as well as the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts.

But there's more to the Earth Day story. The man who originally introduced the name "Earth Day" at the 1969 UN conference was a Pentecostal minister named John McConnell. He acknowledged that others essentially stole his name, "Earth Day," and used it for the April 22 celebration. Some even urged him to sue, but he said he didn't believe in suing. "If there had been no Christian experience in my life there would be no Earth Day—or at least I would not have initiated it," McConnell said. "We love God . . . [and therefore should] have an appreciation for His creation."¹

In today's Scripture passage from Isaiah, there's more than just appreciation. There's most of all anticipation. Through the prophet, God reassures his people that there will be a new exodus, this time from Babylonian captivity. God will deliver his people and bring them back home and dwell in their midst. God describes what he will do using the language of creation. "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" (v. 17). In other words, God will make a whole new reality, a whole new universe.

At first, we may wonder what this has to do with the kinds of things we usually associate with the environment, like land, water, mountains, fields, and forests, not to mention all the animals. After all, according to Isaiah, the centerpiece of this new heaven and new earth is urban territory, the city of Jerusalem. And within this city, human beings, flourishing and thriving in community with one another. It's the human beings, the relationships they share and the quality of their lives, that seem to get the bulk of the attention in Isaiah's vision. In this ideal world, sickness, especially among infants and children, is gone. Someone who celebrates their one hundredth birthday is considered young. Poverty has been eradicated. Mourning and sorrow are things of the past. A holy God is with his holy people, and things are finally as God has always intended them to be.

But notice that in this vision of what happens when God comes and dwells among his people, geography is always in play. A particular place on the map, Jerusalem, becomes the personification of the kind of world that God intends. And the kinds of things that the people do bring them into contact with the land and engagement with the earth (v. 21). They build and plant and cultivate and harvest. They get their hands in the dirt. God even uses a really, really old tree (v. 22) to illustrate how the people's prosperity will go on and on and on. Then, near the close of Isaiah's vision, animals enter the picture as a sign of lasting peace. And lo and behold, the whole passage ends on a mountain.

So within this Scripture passage, we have plenty of signs that the coming of God's salvation involves more than just human beings. God's work of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration includes the non-human creation as well. Now this doesn't mean that humans aren't central in God's saving purposes. God's primary focus is still on redeeming sinful human beings and forming a new humanity where people from all nationalities, races, ethnicities, and languages worship and serve as one people, God's people. But the creation of a new humanity is inseparable from the redemption of all that God has made.

This is why the ongoing reality of Easter, which we celebrated earlier this month, is so important. As Christians, we believe that in Jesus, God took on a human body in order to be with us and to save us. And when God raised Jesus from the dead, it was in bodily form. Yes, a transformed body, a body fit for life in the kingdom of God. But still, a body, a material existence. So the resurrection reaffirms the goodness of God's creation, in all its forms, and anticipates the redemption of the world, both human and non-human. I like the way that author Philip Yancey puts it when he says, "Easter hits a new note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, he can and will repeat on a grand scale."²

It's hard for us to get our minds around the redemption of the whole cosmos. But a good place to start is with our own bodies. Our bodies are our primary point of connection with God's creation. Our bodies are part of God's creation. So when it comes to creation care, our bodies are certainly in the picture. How we care for our bodies, and what we do with them, is an expression of our gratitude for all that God has made.

The fact is, our bodies need to be redeemed. They too are affected by the reality of sin, as is every other part of the world God has made. According to the Scriptures, our sin leads not only to a broken relationship with God but also a broken relationship with other people and a broken relationship with creation. That's why God's saving work in the death and resurrection of Christ has to reach into every aspect of reality. As we hear in Colossians 1:19-20, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

This means that as Christians, our efforts at creation care aren't driven by our desire to save the planet. Rather, we believe that in Christ, God has already acted to save the planet, and that our job is to participate, in a multitude of ways, in God's reclamation of the world he has made. Whether you get involved through recycling, through advocacy on environmental legislation, through picking up trash along the Potomac, through protecting endangered species, through converting to solar energy, or through growing your own vegetables, your action is a form of testimony to God's love for what he has made, and his commitment to bring what he has made to its divine purpose.

"I will create new heavens and a new earth," says the Lord. This means that our stewardship of God's world here in the present is shaped and motivated by our solid hope

that God's ultimate purpose, already anticipated and guaranteed in Christ, is a restored humanity in a restored creation. To be sure, that restoration involves final judgment, the punishment of evil, and the cleansing of unrighteousness, including our own mistreatment and abuse of God's world. But for those who are in Christ, it also means life brought out of death. Life for those who believe, and life for the new creation they will inhabit.

What a glorious promise on which to build our lives and to carry out our vocation in God's world. You see, our anticipation of Christ's coming doesn't relieve us of our responsibilities as stewards of the environment. It actually intensifies our obligation to manage the space that God has entrusted to us.

Pastor A. J. Swaboda tells about serving in a church where they discovered that their children's ministry building had been leaking toxins into the ground for years. The building wasn't really that old. It had only been built about fifteen years earlier. And yet, under the circumstances, the congregation wisely decided to destroy the facility and rebuild it. While Swaboda was standing there watching the cranes destroy the structure, he turned to his senior pastor and asked him why the building was constructed so poorly to begin with. The senior pastor replied that they had built the facility that way because they believed that Jesus was going to be back within the next year.

As Swaboda points out, there are direct connections between our theology and our geography, between what we believe and what we do, including what we do with the creation we inhabit. Now granted, there are some things so vast and mysterious about God's creation that we have to learn to balance what's in our power with what's beyond our control. There was some irony in a phone message we got from Bethany's school on Wednesday, announcing that due to impending weather conditions, the Earth Day cleanup project would be postponed until next week. It was a reminder that this earth we inhabit isn't just shaped by us but actually shapes us too.

We as human beings can't understand ourselves, and our place in God's purposes, apart from the rest of creation. The environment isn't just a stage, a backdrop for us to live out our story. It's actually part of the story. The environment isn't just a warehouse of resources put here for us to consume and then toss aside. It's part of a divine design in which we're charged with making crucial decisions about air, land, water, and all the creatures that inhabit them. The environment is an incredibly complex gift of God where the things we do, and don't do, can affect not only our immediate territory but the lives and circumstances of people in places we've never seen and probably will never go.

When it comes to our stewardship of God's creation, maybe a good place to begin is with the opening word of today's text. The Lord says, "Behold." Behold means that there's something before you that's worthy of your attention. Something to see, to observe, to gaze at. In a day and time when more and more people spend less and less time outside, and when our eyes are usually fixed on a screen of some sort, usually in the palm of our hands, the prophet Isaiah summons us to lift our eyes and behold. Behold the life-giving power of God. Behold the beauty and wonder of God's world. Behold the splendor of what God has done, without turning a blind eye to the damage we have done. But most of all, behold, through Spirit-inspired imagination, what God has promised to do through Christ. A new heavens and a new earth. And then put your heart, your mind, and your hands to work toward that end.

¹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Earth Day's Pentecostal Origins." Christianity Today website. April 22, 2010. Accessed April 22, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2010/april/earth-days-pentecostal-origins.html>>.

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 211.