

The Hope of the New Earth Sunday, 5/31/20

[OFF] Do you like a good story? I sure do. I love to read, and I also really enjoy movies. But I've found that some stories are more appealing to me than others. Call me old-fashioned, but I still like a classic plot line in my stories with a happy ending.

[SHARE: seven basic plots] Most stories follow one of seven basic plot lines. Wikipedia¹ gives them as Overcoming the Monster; Rags to Riches; The Quest; Voyage and Return; Comedy; Tragedy; and Rebirth. In a way, our Bible includes all these plot lines. Jesus overcomes the monster of sin and death by reversing the curse. God's people are cast out from the riches of Eden to the rags of exile, only to be restored to the riches of Eden in the New Earth. God's people are sent on an epic quest to discover their identity as God's children and bring God's blessings to the world. That quest entails a voyage through physical and metaphorical wildernesses, with a promised return to paradise. There is both comedy and tragedy aplenty throughout the Bible, capturing the richness and diversity of the human experience. But more than anything, the story of the Bible, our story, follows the plot line of rebirth, a return from the darkness of death to vibrant and abundant life, not as a never-ending cosmic cycle but as the climactic conclusion of what God began by speaking creation into existence. Now that is the kind of story I love.

[OFF] On this Pentecost Sunday, let's remember that the Holy Spirit was present and active at creation, was present at the baptism of Christ, has been poured out on God's people, and will continue to be our comforter, guide, counselor, and intercessor as we continue to live out this divine story.

And by the way, this isn't just a story about individual saints who will inherit new resurrection bodies. Yes, that will happen, but the story is bigger than that. It's really a sweeping story of all people and of all creation. We're all characters in that drama, and we can take great comfort in knowing that the real hero of the story is none other than God. Each of us may and should rise to make heroic choices in this life, including in our caring for God's creation, but the real protagonist of this story is our creator, who has shown us through the resurrection of Jesus that the curse has indeed been reversed, and the day is

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seven_Basic_Plots

coming when creation will be restored.

You'll remember that in the beginning of the story, in Genesis, Adam was formed out of the dust and given the breath of life in the Garden of Eden. The conclusion of the story is described in Revelation, with an eternity in a restored paradise where the curse of Eden has been reversed forever. What will that look like? The new Eden, or New Earth, is the full realization of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. We spend most of the church year focused on the three years in the life of Jesus when he taught and demonstrated for us what it means for heaven to be on earth, or as we say when we pray The Lord's Prayer, for God's will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Today, we're looking past those pictures of the Kingdom described in the Gospels to the vision given to John of what the New Earth will look like.

I'm continuing in the book of Revelation, the vision given to the Apostle John about 65 years after the resurrection of Jesus, a time of intense persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, while John was living in exile on the island of Patmos. As you hear these words from Revelation, ask yourself these questions: What will my role be in the New Earth? Will I be a tourist, a vandal, or a caretaker? Which of these am I today in my care for God's creation? A tourist, a vandal, or a caretaker? I'm reading now from Revelation 22, verses 1-3 in the New Living Translation. [{Read Revelation 22:1-3, NLT}](#)

[OFF] I don't know about you, but I could use a full submersion in the river of the water of life today. I don't even care how cold it is, I'm ready to take the plunge! It's been an especially challenging year for everyone. There's so much strife and brokenness in our lives and in the world around us that it can overwhelm us and lead us to conclude that hope is either a thing of the past or a thing for foolish people. Covid-19, layoffs, isolation, depression, grief, the unrelenting bad fruit of institutionalized racism, in particular the murder of innocent blacks, and yet another year of politics, politics, and more politics that invades every corner of our lives. We need to draw from the river of the water of life, and we need to do so today. Like the Samaritan woman offered living water by Jesus at the well, we must cry out to Jesus with all that we are and shout, "Please...Give me this water!"²

² John 4:15. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

[SHARE: Graffiti] We all need the living water of Jesus, because that alone will determine whether we, individually and collectively, will have the love, power, and wisdom to relate to God's creation as caretakers. In the New Earth, there will be only caretakers. But in this life, we have choices to make, and so often we make poor choices. Sometimes we chose as vandals, who use and abuse the earth to satisfy our desires with little or no thought for sustainability or eco-justice. Sometimes we chose as tourists, enjoying creation and acknowledging that the goodness and glory of God are revealed in it, but taking no responsibility for tending the garden of this world. Caretakers, on the other hand, are fully committed to God's hopeful plan of restoring the earth and everything on it. Can you see how these different attitudes and our hope are connected? God will bring about the hopeful future described in Scripture, but if we expect to be a part of that future, we need to orient our attitudes and actions with those of God, and we need to do that starting today. N.T. Wright expressed it this way in his book, "Surprised By Hope":

What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for [you]...What 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... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.

[OFF] The hope of the New Earth reminds us that hope is not a thing of the past. Perhaps our problem has been that we've simply put our hope in the wrong things. Anything or any person other than Jesus is bound to disappoint us. But we can count on Jesus. Faith in the living Christ is what brings meaning to each day and offers the hope of restoration and reconciliation of all that is broken. That's why I love movements like the Hopeful Earth Keepers. Earth Keepers are hopeful, because they know that their hope ultimately lies in the God who loves them and calls them into lives of stewardship. They're hopeful because they know that they're not serving as solo stewards, but in the community of the Body of Christ. And they're hopeful because they know that no matter how many sinful choices they've made in the past, any positive change in the present, no matter how small, is a blessing and a step towards a better future.

[SHARE: Dragonfly Zoom-In] Let's return to the painting I introduced at the

beginning of our worship: Ascent of the Dragonflies. It's a beautiful painting taken as a whole, but I want you appreciate how the whole is made up of many small details. I've zoomed into the right corner of the painting so you can see the morning light reflecting on the waves and the grasses, as well as seven of the dragonflies, each with four delicate wings. In a way, our hope together for a New Earth is much like this painting. It's a beautiful picture, but the picture doesn't exist without all the details. Each hopeful heart, and each brave act of hope is like a dragonfly, a blade of grass, or a ripple on the lake. God has designed and is supervising the painting. The question is, what small details do each of us have to contribute to the whole?

[OFF] Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the birth of the Christian Church. My prayer for us as a church, as families, and as individual Christ-followers is that this Pentecost might also be a rebirth of sorts: A rebirth into the role of loving and passionate caretakers of God's creation. We have the advantage of knowing how the story begins and ends: God wins! You'll find your greatest joy in energetically joining in God's restoration of creation. Perhaps that's a purpose you never knew you had. Perhaps you're the hopeful dragonfly that missing before the painting can be completed.

[SHARE: Reflection Slide] Please take a minute now to reflect on how your hope for a New Earth will change you and change the planet. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



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