



To Dwell Among

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 3:8-13
Revelation 21: 1-6

October 31, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

This text from Revelation—it’s the scripture we are supposed to read for All Saints’ Eve, or all Saints’ Day. And perhaps ironically for our earth-care series, this is the same text that some Christians have used to deny climate change, or at least distance themselves from climate-related issues. In John’s revelation here, it says he sees a “new heaven, and a new earth.” And so, the argument goes... why work to preserve the one we have, if we believe a brand-new one is on it’s way?

There’s this weird thing Christians can do, where we believe our ultimate home in our heavenly one, and excuse ourselves from taking care of our earthly home, here and now. We don’t adhere to that kind of interpretation. We know a man named John wrote the book of Revelation while exiled on a Greek island called Patmos by a Roman government trying to rid itself of Christian influence. He was writing about his own experiences, using coded language to condemn the Roman empire. And, I believe, he was writing in such a way that we, too, might imagine our own end of days.

I don’t exactly know what new heaven and new earth John was imagining here. But the description he gives next is one that I have clung to in my own end of days. It’s one that has given generations of faithful some comfort. It says: the home of God will be right here. And God will “dwell” among the people, wiping away every tear from every eye, for death and pain will be no more. I believe that to be true.

I believe that to be true because that lines up with the God the rest of scripture tells us about. It feels inconsistent to me that God would throw away this earth and make a new one. Scripture tells us that God made this earth. It doesn’t tell us exactly what happened. Science does that. But it does tell us why. And from the beginning, it seems God has been infatuated

with her creation.

We remember in the first chapter of Genesis—we read a little of it last week—God speaks, things are made, and all of it is proclaimed as... good.

The second chapter of Genesis is a little different. It reads like it might be an extension of the same story, but it’s not. The Hebrew changes. The story changes.

In this second account of creation, something is named as “not good.” It was not good that the human creature was alone. But as soon as something is not good, God doesn’t toss it out—metaphorically crumple the paper and start over. God creates again. Keeps creating, until the goodness is restored.

And in this second chapter of Genesis, God isn’t a big, booming voice from on high. Here, God is walking around in the garden. God is experiencing a breeze, scooping up dirt and making things. As I understand the text—God is enjoying this new creation.

All the rest of scripture points to God’s delight. Over and over again, these earth creatures—we mess things up. We somehow find a way to ruin everything and God never throws the whole thing away. Even with Noah and the flood, our 3rd creation story, God preserves what has been made. God so loves this earth, that God keeps finding another way. Keeps redeeming. Keeps restoring. God so loves the earth, the gospel says, that God came as Jesus Christ, and lived and died to create another way for us, yet again.

This is a God who desires to wipe away tears. This is not a God who’s going to shake out the Etch-a-sketch. God isn’t going to throw it away and start over because scripture tells us, and I believe, that God dwells with us. God is not distant, removed, far away. This is God’s home, too.

When we talk about climate change, about earth-care issues, we often talk about the science of it—sometimes the politics of it. But, for me, the most

convincing argument we have here is a spiritual one.

We should understand and trust the science. We should be aware of the politics. But if we believe, deeply believe, that God created the earth—we should want to care for it. If we desire, as people of faith, as spiritual beings living a human existence, if we desire to know our God, we should work to protect this.

The first time I ever visited our mission partners on the Mexican border, it was with a few friends from my former church in Miami. We knew of Mark Adams and his work, so we asked Mark and his wife Miriam if we could come visit.

I didn't realize until years later that this was a strange request. At the time, they weren't hosting visitors. We were unintentionally some of the first. And so, that first visit, we stayed with them at their home, got to know their family. Which means, we also got to know their chickens.

They had recently started keeping chickens for their eggs. Their son (who was young at the time) was carefully introducing us to each chicken, telling us about their personalities, as you do. And I remarked, at one point, how they had quite a lot of chickens. I know folks who keep chickens for their eggs. I've researched how to do it myself. And I know you don't need *that* many chickens.

So Miriam explained that they had one rooster so that some of the eggs would be fertilized and hatch, so they could also raise the chickens for meat. Except, raising these chicks by hand led their kids to giving them names. And knowing their personalities. Generally, becoming quite attached. So now, she explained... now they just had a lot of chickens.

"We've learned the hard way," she said, "that when something has a name, it becomes a pet. And we do not eat our pets." There's an abundance of wisdom there. Creatures become less consumable when you get to know them.

This is my fear for us in these days. We have the capacity to understand the science. Some people are choosing not to—that's different. We have studied, documented; the death of our planet is coming. And I believe that grieves most of us. But I also think that we are so removed from this planet, that it is going to be hard for us to change our lifestyles in such a way that we stop killing it.

We go to the store, driving in cars that keep us cool in the summer and warm in the winter and unless you have something like my old Honda with leaks around the doors, we stay dry in the rain. Our food sources have little to do with weather patterns. We go to the store and we purchase our chicken never wondering what its name was. We enjoy our burgers, never seeing the amount of CO² generated from that cow, or acres of land and thousands of gallons of water it took to grow him.

We can consume... and consume and consume... without ever really touching this earth. And while that is a modern miracle, it's spiritually dangerous. We consume, without ever engaging our spiritual selves, without ever negotiating the connectedness between ourselves and the creation we consume. And that, I believe, is a problem.

Lately, there's this thing we do, whenever I hear us talk about climate change. Where we lament, we recognize we need to do things differently, but at some point we throw up our hands because... what can we really do? And I get that. Last week, Tom said this is something that governments, nations, the earth as a whole is going to have to engage. And that's true.

And, I think it's also true, that the little things we can each do, the lifestyle changes that aren't hard, but are usually inconvenient, I think those matter. We won't save the planet by not using plastic bags, no. But every time I grab a reusable bag, resist the easier, more convenient thing, it does something to me.

It's been 10 years now since I've eaten meat. And there are days when I realize it'd be a lot easier to warm up a piece of chicken than to chop up the veggies and cook the beans and rice. And despite what the meat industry wants us to believe, I just grew a human and have nursed him for 5 months without animal protein. It's absolutely possible. It's inconvenient. But it's made me connect to my food differently. And I think that matters.

It's so easy to forget that God dwells in creation. It's easy, convenient to believe that God is "up there," "out there," perhaps created the world, but like a divine inventor—spun the thing into being and then stepped away to let us figure it out.

But I believe, scripture and experience tells us that's not who God is. That God loves this broken world

and has never left it alone. And if God is dwelling here with us, the imperative to live differently changes. It's not just something we take up as global citizens. It's something we must do, as people of faith, if we want to know something of the God of the universe.

In my own experience, the recognition of God in the midst of this world happens most readily when someone we love in this world is suddenly no longer here. It doesn't have to be during loss or grief, but those profound experiences often open us up to noticing things we've previously missed.

I noticed, early on in my ministry, how folks who recently lost someone would often bring up "weird" things (by their own definition) that they would experience. They often say it, almost in a whisper. Wait to see how I react before continuing their stories. These might sound familiar to you.

They'll say, "You know, the day mom passed, I noticed this new bird at my window. And he's been coming and greeting me every day since. You don't think...?"

Or, "You know, my grandma had this perfume I'll never forget. And sometimes, when I'm on my morning walks, I catch a whiff of it. You don't think...?"

Or, "You know, my daughter and I always had this little joke about numbers. And the day she died I had to get gas, and that's the number that I accidentally stopped the gas on. And then yesterday I was driving behind a car with that number on their license plate. You don't think...?"

For me, it's sunsets. The day my mom was cremated, our family went outside and happened to look up and found the most amazing sunset we'd ever seen. It was as if she was greeting us, grateful to finally be free of that body.

And sometimes it's cardinals. My grandpa died a year ago this week. He was a country singer, among other things, and he had this song about cardinals creating a singing Christmas tree. In the years after my mom's death, I began noticing them more and more in our yard. When my grandpa joined her in death, I began to notice them, more often than not, in pairs.

So to answer the question of all those who have ever asked me: Yes, I do think. I do think that we live in world that can be scientifically known, but that is still shrouded in great mystery. And I believe that our

God is the kind of creator that doesn't just walk away from what has been made and loved. I believe that God dwells with us. So I don't think it's a stretch of the spiritual imagination to believe that the God who wraps our loved ones in comfort also stirs the birds and paints the sunsets when we, too, need our tears wiped away.

In my last church, down in Miami, Florida, the kids I taught at our church school taught me about this tradition some of them celebrated: Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. It's a holiday that originates in Mexico, where some of my kids were from, and corresponds with our All Saints' Day.

Every year, about this time, some of them would come to school with their faces painted like skeletons. Honestly, I was not a fan. Something about kids looking like skeletons offended my midwest sensibilities.

But they were eager to teach me. So they brought me pictures of their homes, and even invited me over, to see the "ofrendas" they would build—altars of various style in their homes, covered with images of family and friends who had died, various decorations, always marigold flowers. Families would take this night to cook the favorite food of someone they were missing that year. They'd eat and tell stories. They'd practice remembering, but make it a party. Contrary to our protestant services of All Saints, which usually involve the tolling of a bell, solemn, serious celebration. This Day of the Dead stuff was fun. And weird. And felt holy in new ways.

The Disney movie "Coco" made this kind of celebration more well-known in recent years. The thing the movie explains well is that the act of "remembering" has power. It's not just something we do to make ourselves feel better, to help us not forget. The very act of remembering keeps alive those we've lost. In this tradition, heaven is not a far-away, distant place where those we've lost sit removed and wait for us to die. They're present at the party, if only we remember.

I think something similar happens when we practice earth care in our daily lives. I think the practice is a way of remembering that God is here, this earth is sacred, and while the little things we do won't entirely save the planet, they might save us from thinking there isn't more to this earthly experience we're having. They might save us from consuming without noticing

the tiny details of a creator that loves her creation. They might open us up to the mystery of the God who dwells here.

And so, on this peculiar Sunday of earth care and All Saints, I invite you to remember. If you feel so inclined, have a little party when you get home, set up your own alters, invite those who are no longer with us, and pay attention. Let your eyes and your heart be open to the God who is right there with you.

And as you pay attention, consider how the daily practices of your lives reflect an awareness of God's

indwelling... or not. Make some changes—not because our planet depends on it, but because your soul does.

And whatever you do, hold the hope. Because God created this world, loves it, and is not planning to throw it away. If scripture is to be trusted, we can believe that God is already saving it, redeeming it, making a new way as only our God can. And we, living here and now, as conscientious people who trust our God and science, we get to be part of that new way, if we so choose. So hold the hope, and then let's live like God dwells with us here, too.