

Creation and New Creation

24th Sunday after Pentecost – November 14, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Isaiah 65:17-19,23-25b

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

²³ They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;

Getting to heaven??

What is our ultimate destination? We often talk about “getting to heaven” or “being in paradise.” But this answer sells us short. Heaven, at least so far as most of us think about it, is a waiting room, a *temporary* resting place. The end of the story does not lie in our floating around some distant clouds as disembodied spirits, but, rather, it lies in the promise of a “new heavens and a new earth” spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah centuries before Jesus.

God creates everything and it is good

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . .” Most also know that God pronounced it good: “And God saw that the light was good; . . .” God created all that is ~ all matter, all energy ~ and, not surprisingly, it is a good



The Butterfly & New Creation

The butterfly is one of the symbols in St. Andrew’s Rose Window. It is a well-known symbol of new creation. The creature passes from its first physical existence as a caterpillar to a new physical existence as a butterfly; from its old self, the caterpillar, to its new self, the butterfly. It is still the same creature, though dramatically different and unarguably much more beautiful. Understanding that the butterfly is the same creature is important to comprehending the biblical perspective on creation and new creation. If caterpillars had friends, they’d still know one another even after the burst of new creative energy that transforms them into butterflies. Sam the caterpillar would simply become Sam the butterfly. It’s still Sam.

When we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are born from above (see John 3), we are new creations. In the words of Paul, “the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). But . . . we are still ourselves. Scott is still Scott; Patti is still Patti. We understand this easily enough, but the next part is trickier.

Someday you and I will die. And after our death, we will enjoy a life-after-death while we await our own physical, bodily resurrection – yours and mine – our “life after life-after-death.” Like the caterpillar, we will be transformed but it will still be us. I’m Scott now. I’ll be Scott in “heaven.” And I’ll be Scott after the great resurrection and enjoy the “new heavens and the new earth.” The truth is that each of us matters far more to God than we can really comprehend.

creation. Nonetheless, we humans seem to be drawn to the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual or, as some might say, “it is our souls that really matter, our bodies are just smelly, easy-to-break vessels for our souls.” But this is not the Christian view.

I never thought that I would use the word “Gnosticism” in one of these studies. But not long ago, I was walking through Barnes & Noble and saw a sign, “Gnostic Writings,” on a prominent end-cap. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Talk of Gnosticism arrived in the public eye with *The DaVinci Code*, which relies on Gnostic writings for much of its depiction of Christianity.

Gnosticism (from the Greek word for “knowledge,” *gnosis*) is not a religion but more of a perspective about the world that sits on the edge of many religions. Gnosticism has two hallmark beliefs. *First*, the Gnostic perspective is that the physical world was created by a lesser, inferior god and, hence, is inferior to the spiritual realm. For many Gnostics, the physical world is not just inferior, it is evil. Not surprisingly then, the purpose of life becomes to leave the material world and to ascend to the higher, superior spiritual realm. *Second*, in Gnosticism the path to the higher, spiritual realm is reached through some sort of secret knowledge. For example, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas¹ begins by saying that it contains the secret sayings of Jesus.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let’s look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God’s creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God’s kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God’s kingdom evident to all. We can’t build the kingdom, that is God’s work, but we can build *for* the

Genesis – a book of beginnings

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the book of Genesis to the rest of the Bible. It opens with two creation stories, the first written from God’s perspective and the second from the humans’ perspective. What quickly follows is the story of the humans’ tragic decision to turn away from God seeking to be like gods themselves. We then get the story of Noah, a story of “uncreation” and a fresh start that proves little better than the first. Then, in Genesis 12, we are told how God chose a lone husband and wife, Abraham and Sarah, with whom God made a covenant that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. As the rest of the 50-chapter book unfolds, we see God’s redemptive work moving forward through Abraham and Sarah’s descendents.

kingdom. Every kind touch, every mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice – none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God’s renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical *and* the spiritual.²

New Creation

Look again at Isaiah’s depiction of the “new heavens and the new earth.” See how concrete it is. A new Jerusalem, no more weeping, no more infant death, wolves and lambs sharing a meal, lions eating like they are oxen! Centuries later, John would incorporate these images and metaphors into his Revelation, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven . . . then the angel showed me the river of the water of life . . . on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit . . .” (from Rev. 21 and 22). All these images appeal to our imaginations as we contemplate the glories of God’s renewed creation. And their concreteness expresses the Christian hope, the confidence, that God will one day, in a burst of new creative energy, restore creation to the full goodness expressed in the opening two chapters of Genesis. From Isaiah’s “new heavens and new earth” to our own weekly affirmation of the resurrection of our bodies, we look forward to and work toward a new life in a renewed world that overflows with the love of God and one another.

¹The Gospel of Thomas dates to the mid-2nd Century AD. It is a list of roughly 110 so-called secret sayings of Jesus. It bears no resemblance to the Gospels canonized in the NT and, so far as we know, was never considered for canonization by significant portions of the Christian community.

²N.T. Wright expressed this far better in a sermon entitled, “New Life – New World,” from his book *Following Jesus*. This was my April 2004 book recommendation and copies are still available in our bookstore.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the “new heavens and new earth”)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 65:17-25 The entire “new creation” passage from which today’s Scripture passage was taken.</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 66:14-24 The reign and the indignation of God. We often want to skip over the not-so-attractive images of what awaits those who rebel against God – but the images are always there in the OT and the NT.</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Peter 3:1-13 The promise of Jesus’ second coming. Note the reference to the new heavens and earth in v. 13 – where righteousness is at home!</p>	<p>Day 4 Revelation 21 The new heavens, new earth, and new Jerusalem</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 22:1-7 The river of the water of life and the tree of life</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Want to learn more about the Bible??

We have an ever-growing assortment of resources that you might find helpful. Here is an overview:

www.standrewccl.org

All the weekly Background Studies (about 120 now!) are archived here and are listed in reverse chronological order. You can use the “find” function in Internet Explorer to search for studies on specific Bible passages. Developing a Keyword index for the studies is on our to-do list!

Overheads and worksheets for ten Bible Academy courses are at this site, ranging from *Introducing the Bible* to *From Buddhism to Mormonism*. You can reach these by clicking “materials for Scott’s classes” on the Welcome page or the Bible Academy page.

All my book recommendations are here, as well as some recommended links to other sites.

www.scottengle.blogspot.com

My blog is up and going and I’ve gotten some encouraging feedback on it. I try to post information and links that you will find helpful, interesting, and occasionally fun.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

This week’s study is largely focused on a single theme, that the biblical perspective of God’s new creation, of God’s kingdom, is not merely spiritual but also physical. This may seem self-evident given that every week we rise and say the Apostles Creed aloud, affirming our belief in the “resurrection of the body.” However, I’ve learned that many Christians think the affirmation is speaking only of Jesus, not of ourselves. But the affirmation is about our own resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection came first but it will not have been unique!

You might begin by reflecting and talking about this business of a *physical* renewal of creation and the *physical* resurrection of ourselves. Do you believe it? What do you think it means? If you are like me, you’d like a whole more information than the Bible gives us (will I get all my hair back!). How can we embrace the notion of a renewed creation without knowing the details? Might it come down to trusting God? Can we trust that regardless of what this renewal will be like, it will be good?

What are the implications for *this life* of a physical end/new beginning to our story? Does it make any difference at all? If your body is as important as your soul, how does it change your view of your own body?