

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“All Creatures of Our God and King”
Revelation 5:11-14
Third Sunday after Easter
April 18, 2010

Theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observed that a question fundamental to the book of Revelation is, “Who is the true Lord of this world?” (1)

Today’s Scripture lesson is a part of John of Patmos’ effort to answer the question.

What occurs in this reading is the culmination of the scene that begins a couple of chapters earlier (Revelation 4: 1). The vivid scene starts large, with a throne surrounded by 24 thrones and a sky spitting lightning and growling thunder, and it keeps getting larger as the Lamb who is Jesus Christ receives the heavenly scroll from the hand of God. Finally, the music swells into the grand crescendo which is today’s New Testament lesson.

In an article which appears in this month’s *National Geographic*, Barbara Kingsolver writes, “We keep an eye out for wonders, my daughter and I, every morning as we walk down our farm lane to meet the school bus.” (2)

And they find them, these wonders:

- A spider web drooping with dew like a rhinestone necklace,
- A rain-colored heron rising from the creek bank,
- A visitation of frogs, dozens of them, launching themselves upward from the grass in bouncing arcs,
- A snapping turtle garbed in primordial olive drab armor. (3)

I found my way to Kingsolver’s lovely language about the wonders of creation through the recommendation of one of the members of the Stewardship Committee who, when I mentioned that today’s sermon would be related to this week’s observance of Earth Day, asked me, “Have you seen the latest *National Geographic*, the special April issue on water?” “You should read it,” he said, adding, “It is frightening.”

In her *National Geographic* article, Kingsolver writes movingly of visiting the Bajo Piura Valley in Peru as a journalist. She was there to cover an innovative project, a partnership between Peruvian conservationists and Heifer International, as the population was guided into herding goats. In the shade of a stick shelter, a young mother set her dented pot on a dung-fed fire and showed how she curdled goat’s milk into white cheese. But what struck Kingsolver was how difficult it was for this woman to fit the task of milking goats into her schedule, when she had to walk eight hours of every day to collect water.

The husbands of the women were digging a well nearby, but they worked with hand trowels, and their work yielded only a mountain of exhumed, dry sand. Kingsolver writes that she had to turn aside to hide her professional tears. And she goes on to observe that what she witnessed there is a microcosm of life on our planet. Five years later, there is still no water in this area. Forty percent of the households in sub-Saharan Africa are more than a half hour from the nearest water, and that distance is growing as desertification grows as a result of desperate people cutting down anything living for firewood. (4) And this “precarious molecular edge on which we survive,” as Kingsolver calls it, will only grow more precarious. By 2025, 1.8 billion people will live where water is scarce. (5)

It *is* frightening, as I was told. And in the face of these and other frightening predictions about the ecological wellbeing of the planet, what could a Scripture passage like this possibly contribute in a helpful way to the situation? Wouldn't it be far better to do something more “realistic”? Perhaps scrap the scripture reading and the sermon altogether, pronounce the benediction, and send everybody home to log onto www.ngm.nationalgeographic.com and get better educated, with the instructions to come back next Sunday with a written ecological pledge of something that each one of us will do that we are not now doing to be a better steward of the creation? (That's not a bad idea, actually; we briefly considered doing something along those lines today, and perhaps we will do exactly this on some future Earth Day.)

To read a passage about a choir singing praises to God, a massive choir not only of human beings but of angels too, and not only of angels, but of sparrows singing soprano and frogs dividing themselves into altos and tenors and whales taking on the low bass parts, is not very practical in the face of the planet's terrific environmental challenges, is it?

It is, then, I think, a good thing for us to remember that the same observation was likely leveled at John of Patmos during the late first century when he inked onto parchment the lines which became the book of Revelation. It was a time when a social and political crisis threatened the churches. In the second chapter of Revelation, there is the mention of Antipas of Pergamum who was condemned for his Christian faith and executed. It was a kind of test case, if you will, with the Roman government jangling its swords in menacing anticipation of quelling the Christian upstarts. John was a pastor who had a tender and responsible relationship to the people in the crisis that they were facing. He could have done something realistic, something that might have actually helped to change the situation. He could have organized a lobbying effort to persuade the Roman government to be more tolerant. He could have raised funds for Antipas' widow and children. (6)

This is not John's way. Rather what he does is to paint a rather surrealistic picture of a vision that came to him in a dream and offer up a collection of hymns which say, in effect, the future has been decided. Do not be frightened, for the future is in God's hands, and, in the end, God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. (7)

And surely when John presented this picture, there were those who called positioned him in their crosshairs and taunted, “unrealistic.”

When we read this passage in the context of the world's environmental challenges, I am tempted to page through *National Geographic* and wave some of the vivid photographs from around the world in John's face. A parched mob in India pressing against a well in India where summer temperatures top 115 degrees. Mount Everest's East Rongbuk Glacier losing 350 vertical feet of ice over the past 8 decades. An acrid haze hanging over Chinese villagers. The Jordan River where Jesus himself was baptized, depleted by drought, pollution, and overuse. Picture after picture of various creatures on the verge of extinction.

Seeing these photographs, I want to spread them in front of the biblical writer's face and chide, "Unrealistic!"

To read Revelation 5: 11-14 in the face of such frightening and stunning reality is to be, on the one hand, unrealistic. It is also to affirm our ultimate hope.

And perhaps in the times in which we live—these itchy, anxious times--what we need at least as much, and perhaps even more than realism, is hope: hope that is grounded not in ourselves, but in the Creator of all things who loves us and all creation, and in whose loving and gracious hands the future ultimately rests.

Have you noticed? Have you noticed that when people get anxious and itchy about the future how harsh we can be with one another? Have you ever felt called out, maybe even assaulted, by someone who verbally grabbed you by the lapels and shook you violently when you absentmindedly chunked your soda can into the wastebasket rather than the recycling bin? Have you ever arched your eyebrows upward in green self-righteousness at someone whom you encountered as she schlepped groceries from supermarket to minivan in plastic rather than one of our handy reusable DCPC "God is green" bags?

These are just little things, perhaps, but they are indicative, I sense, of our need for the renewal of hope. As Karen McKenzie, the science teacher who quoted in an article entitled "God and Green" in yesterday's *Charlotte Observer*, said, "caring for the earth isn't just about duty. It's about love. Everywhere," she said, "there is something to celebrate. Insects, stunning in their intricacy. The surprising call of a daytime owl in Freedom Park. Nature works in perfect harmony, and as a Christian, I believe there is one person who orchestrated that, God." (8)

As so, on this Sunday before Earth Day 2010, in the face of so many environmental challenges, what shall we do? Yes, we resolve to do our part in making responsible decisions about our use of the world's natural resources. Yes, some of you who are scientists and students studying to be scientists dedicate your intellect to finding solutions. Yes, we keep our eyes open to wonder as we move about in nature. Yes, we are gentle with our fellow human beings, recognizing that we all fall short not only of God's intentions for us, but even of our own best intentions for ourselves. Yes, above all, we look to the future with hope and not with fear, for the future belongs to God whose kingdom will come, whose will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 58. Quoted in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year C* by Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, and James D. Newsome (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 292.
2. Barbara Kingsolver, "Water Is Life," *National Geographic*, April 2010, Vol. 217, No.4, 44.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 48.
5. Editor's Note, *National Geographic*, April 2010, Vol. 217, No. 4, 4.
6. M. Eugene Boring, "Everything Is Going to Be All Right," *Preaching Through the Apocalypse: Sermons from Revelation*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis: Chalice, 1992), 76.
7. *Ibid.*, 77.
8. Amber Veverka, "God and Green," *The Charlotte Observer*, April 17, 2010.