

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, May 7, 2023
10am

Text: John 14:1-14 (NRSVUE)

Theme: New Life Welcomes All Creatures

[prayer]

Some years ago, my family's home suffered a small invasion of Pacific tree frogs. It wasn't quite a biblical plague, but it was perplexing. You have probably encountered these little frogs before – they're only about two inches long and come in a range of colors, though most are green or brown. Their habitat is vast, stretching from northern California all the way to southern Alaska.

Our family property includes a natural draw, and further down a hill there is a small wetland that fills whenever the local creek floods. In the spring and summer, you can hear the frogs calling to each other in the cool evenings. But for a season, they were somehow making their way into our basement. We'd hear a "ribbet-ribbet" echo up the basement stairs, but we usually couldn't find the culprit. Many months later we would find a sad, mummified frog in a bucket or a drawer.

One evening we flipped on the den light and found a frog scaling the wall. We all crowded round and watched it in fascination for a few minutes before my dad gently dislodged it and set it free outside. Around this same time a large toad also took up residence in our garage. We would catch it coming and going, quickly hopping out of the way as our car pulled in.

Who knows why these critters decided to bless us with their presence for a time? They joined a myriad of other creatures that call our property home: pheasants, quail, magpies, and songbirds; mice and pocket gophers; coyotes, deer, and the occasional moose, porcupine, and herd of elk. I use the word 'bless' intentionally. We know the famous verse in Hebrews 13: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (v. 2). Are these strangers of the human variety only? I think not. Even the smallest

sparrow can make me think of God. Not so much the spider that surprises me in the shower; I guess I have some room to grow in my sense of hospitality!

Modern life draws a firm line between inside and outside, the human world and the natural world. These artificial boundaries contribute to our alienation from the rest of Creation. But are we not also creatures created by God living in God's Creation? Our alienation from the land, and its flora and fauna, has led to abuse and neglect of the earth. Christians have contributed to this problem with some bad theology over the years. Certain interpretations of our Scripture lesson is one such example.

If you have attended a funeral or memorial service recently, it is likely you heard these words read from John's Gospel. The image of Jesus going ahead and preparing an eternal home for us in heaven is a comfort when we are facing our own death or the death of someone we love. It is one of our core convictions as Christians that there is eternal life beyond the grave, and that eternal life includes an eternal home.

But that is precisely where our theology has gone astray. Because we have created a false dichotomy between this life and the next, assigning greater value to our eternal home than our temporal home. We then use this bad theology as justification for our neglect and abuse of the earth.

But Scripture teaches that our eternal home is not strictly what lies beyond St. Peter's gates. It is not puffy clouds and halos and angel wings. Neither is our eternal home exclusively spiritual; in fact, if we believe that our bodies will one day be resurrected, then we must also believe that the afterlife is material – that is, made of matter.

Scripture teaches that our eternal home is the same home we inhabit now: the earth. But it is the earth redeemed, restored, renewed, and transformed. Revelation 21 says,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more...³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God...*

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

This is Scripture’s vision of our eternal home: a new heaven and *a new earth*. We call this the New Creation.

In 1785 John Wesley published a sermon on Revelation 21:5 entitled “The New Creation.” In it he offered a cosmic view of our salvation. Salvation is ultimately the restoration of relationship: Our relationships with God, ourselves, the planet, and – take note – even animals. Wesley intentionally highlights the place of other creatures in the New Creation. At the end of the sermon, he hails our deliverance from sin and then writes that in eternity “There will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!”¹

All the creatures. All creatures will have a place in the New Creation – not just human beings. And that place is both a new heaven and a new earth, where all God’s creatures will enjoy right relationship with each other in the presence of our Creator.

This promise of renewed relationship in the eternal presence of God has already begun. In our Scripture lesson, Jesus teaches “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (v. 2). The word translated as ‘dwelling places’ (NRSVUE) or ‘rooms’ (NIV) is used again in verse 23 when Jesus says, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (NRSVUE).

What is this house and home that Jesus speaks of?

¹ *The Sermons of John Wesley*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. Location 18060-18061.

Certainly, Jesus is alluding to our eternal home in the New Creation at the end of time. But Jesus is also referring to a present reality. New life is available to us here and now because God's reign on this earth has already begun. This reign was inaugurated by Jesus' death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Remember that the biblical understanding of eternity is not just about life after we die; eternal life is something to be grasped in the present! And eternal life is in our grasp because of the special relationship that Jesus has with the Father.

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (v. 10). Jesus is reminding the disciples that he is the incarnate Word of God – he dwells in God and God dwells in him. What Jesus wants the disciples to understand is that after he ascends to the Father, this indwelling relationship will encompass the disciples and all the believers who follow them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we now dwell in the presence of God and God dwells in the presence of us. This mutual indwelling begins right here, right now, on this earth, not in some far-off heaven. And the gift of God's presence, with the promise of new life that it brings, extends to the whole of Creation and all of God's creatures.

Jesus' words to his disciples in John 14 are about this eternal, sacred communion that all creation shares with God. His words are not exclusively about the afterlife, or how to get to heaven. Instead, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the new way of living that they will receive after he ascends to the Father.

Thomas misunderstands Jesus and thinks Jesus is speaking of dwelling with God in a particular geographic location. He asks Jesus for directions: "Lord, how can we know the way?" (v. 5). To which Jesus replies,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (vv. 6-7).

Our home with God is not exclusively about location. It is about our relationship with God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' incarnational relationship with the Father has made God's love known to us in a supremely tangible way. This love is not simply spiritual; it is also physical, material. While the incarnation is our highest example, all of creation is an expression of God's love.

Perhaps you have experienced the beauty of God's love while walking in nature. Perhaps you have marveled, standing on the edge of the ocean, or gazing up at the heavens, just how deep and how wide His love is. Perhaps you catch a surprising glimpse of God when you bend down to admire a flower, or watch a hummingbird sip at her feeder, or cuddle a beloved pet.

The wonder we feel when we interact with Creation – from its smallest parts all the way up its cosmic scale – that feeling of awe and wonder is our spirits resonating with God's love all around us, like a tuning fork vibrating at a certain pitch. All of Creation bears the stamp of Love. In our pride and self-centeredness, we forget that God did not create the universe for us. Creation is a result of God's overflowing love – a creative and creating love that continually brings forth new life. "I AM who I AM," God says (Ex 3:14). God's love just *is*, and we are but one part of that love. When we forget this and usurp our place in the harmony of God's Creation, we foster disorder, disharmony, and de-creation. But when we care for the earth and her creatures, we honor the indwelling and holy relationship that God has with all of Creation. We reflect a vision of the New Creation that is to come. And we become co-creators with God, redeeming, restoring, renewing, and transforming our eternal home.

Amen.