

Season of Creation – Sky 9.23.2018
“Heaven Can Wait”
Marie F. Fleming

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the environmental biologist and native Potawatomi whose work has been quoted from this pulpit many times over the past year or so, characterizes the domains of creation – humanity, fauna, flora, rivers and seas, mountains, sky sun moon stars – as kin to one another.

During this Season of Creation we humans practice placing ourselves in other domains’ “shoes” so to speak, to hear their voices in scripture. We examine their perspectives so we can grow to be more faithful and more fruitful members of the family of God we call creation.

Today’s biblical readings give us lenses through which to view the unique roles that the sky plays in our texts.

(from Web of Creation website):

In scripture, “Sky” refers to the domains of creation above and around Earth—the wind, the clouds, the air—the atmosphere.

but it also includes the “heavenly bodies” the sun and moon and stars.

The term translated ‘heavens’ in the Hebrew Bible usually just means sky.... It is the sky in Psalm 19 that proclaims God’s glory. It is the sky that turns dark in mourning at the desolation of Earth in Jeremiah, and at the suffering of Jesus on the cross in our reading from Mark.

In each case, heaven responds to earth, is interwoven with Earth’s life and suffering.

But our Western sensibility of a dual universe divides Earth and heaven into two separate and unequal spheres – Earth being the locus of lowly bodily life, heaven the home of the spirit, a realm of far greater value. Jesus, after all, teaches the disciples to pray to “Our Father in heaven”. Centuries of art and literature portray a 3-story universe with heaven above, Earth below, and hell below that.

One outcome of this devaluation of all things Earth is that Earth becomes humanity's "giving tree", the endlessly self-giving mother, perpetually sacrificing herself for the sake of offspring who refuse to grow up; who will not take responsibility for their consumeristic ways.

And then there is the well-rehearsed idea that going to heaven is the chief aim of human life, thus reducing Earth to just a stopping place on the way to eternity someplace else. According to Lutheran creation justice theologian, Rob Saler, *such visions of salvation as "going to heaven when you die" in such a way that one completely leaves the Earth behind, have funded significant social inequalities.* [Season of creation.org – Sky Sunday sermon] If Earth matters little, so do its inhabitants.

One of the most extreme examples of this kind of theology is The Rapture, popularized in recent times by the Left Behind novel series and related product lines such as video games (!)

The Rapture figures large in the belief system on the fundamentalist end of the theological spectrum. In our Living the Questions study group last week we discussed the Rapture. It is an "end-times" narrative that was invented in the mid-19th Century by evangelist John Nelson Darby. Darby created a time- and story-line regarding Christ's second coming by cherry picking verses from the Hebrew scriptures and misreading the book of Revelation. He patched together a rather fantastical and, for many people, wildly attractive vision of how the world will end. That end is characterized by a militant Christ coming back to Earth as head of an army to destroy the Earth and all that lies therein. Chief among the scenes set by the Rapture narrative is the sudden disappearance of the righteous, who will rise to sit out the violence of Christ's second coming like a crowd in Caesar's coliseum, safely ensconced in ring-side seats in heaven. While the created world comes to a bloody end.

But Revelation scholar and Lutheran pastor, Barbara Rossing writes, *"The Rapture is a racket. Whether prescribing a violent script for Israel or survivalism in the United States, this theology distorts God's vision for the world. In place of healing, the Rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus' blessing of peacemakers, the Rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war. In place of*

Revelation's vision of the Lamb's vulnerable self-giving love, the Rapture celebrates the lion-like wrath of Christ the Lamb. This theology is not biblical. We are not Raptured off the earth, nor is God. No, God has come to live in the world through Jesus. God created the world, God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind!" [Barbara Rossing, The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in Revelation.]

Indeed, in today's lectionary readings, "sky" is far from being synonymous with airy removal from the turmoil of God's people. "Sky" is the sign of God's presence. [Saler]

To the extent that, as our Psalm suggests, "the heavens tell the glory of God," then to desecrate the sky – including misrepresenting the heavenly domain as the Rapture does - might even be akin to desecrating an icon or profound work of religious art.

Does the sky turn dark when we do wrong? Does the sky turn dark when we are unjust to God's creation, and to the creatures who inhabit it (particularly the poor who bear the lion's share of suffering when Earth's ecosystems are degraded)? When pollution and industrial blight diminish the beauty of what God has made, then it is no preacherly hyperbole to suggest that it might indeed be the skies themselves that bear prophetic witness against us and our injustice.

But if, as we have been suggesting, that presence expresses alarm over the forces of death and injustice, it also provides images worthy of beautiful celebration. When the epistle writer seeks language to describe what it means to exist in harmony with God's righteousness, he gives his readers the promise that those who live in peace will "shine like stars." [Saler]

I am reminded of Derek Black, subject of a just-released book called "Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a former white nationalist". Black grew up in the household of infamous KKK leader David Duke, and so was immersed in that ideology from an early age. Then he went to college. There his beliefs were challenged both by pushback from students and teachers AND by coming into contact with people who were different from himself, whom he had been taught to hate, but whom, instead, he grew to like. Over a period of years Black came to disavow his white nationalist roots.

In a recent interview on The Daily Show, Trevor Noah, playing the Devil's advocate, asked,

"You believed something was true for so long, and now you say, No, the opposite is true.

How do you know you believe the correct thing now?

Black answered, " I'm driven by ... what makes life better for people, including white people, and that is a value that I don't think could be wrong. ...If something hurts other people then we have to figure out a way to change the system so we are all included." *[Trevor Noah The Daily Show*

<http://www.cc.com/video-clips/3w4cbf/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-eliaslow---derek-black---from-racism-to-redemption-in--rising-out-of-hatred----extended-interview>]

Surely, Derek is one of those persons Philippians imagines as one who shines like a star.

Like the cloud of witnesses for whom we give thanks every time we worship, the sky is for us and with us, a presence ever aware and responsive, sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in joy, sometimes in judgment

but never, ever as a party to forces that would leave God's good Earth behind.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.