

SERMON TITLE: "Universal Restoration"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 3:17-26 and Genesis 6:11-22
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 5, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Every year, Earth Day and Native American Ministries Day fall soon after Easter. Since Native American spirituality has a lot to do with the earth, it makes sense to celebrate those two things together today in a kind of festival of God's creation. I hope you have enjoyed the video prayers and beauty-of-the-earth emphases you've already experienced in today's worship service.

As I thought about the situation of our earth, the scripture about Noah's ark came to mind. Genesis tells us that, not long after humans came to inhabit God's good earth, human behavior brought about a terrible devastation. It was only through Noah's quick-acting obedience that his family and the animals of the earth were saved. The other scripture I thought about was our reading from Acts 3, in which Peter spoke to his fellow Jews about something he called "universal restoration."

This term, "universal restoration," is found in verse 21 in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Other translations use phrases like "to restore everything," "the complete restoration," or "the times of restitution of all things." All these different phrases convey the Christian belief that, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, God is working to set things right in the world. God is trying to overcome the separation between God and people. God is trying to overcome divisions between people. In fact, God is trying to create harmony between all elements of creation. In the birth, death, resurrection, and ultimate return of Christ, God is working to bring about universal restoration.

1—RESTORATION BETWEEN GOD AND PEOPLE

As Christians, we believe that the starting place for universal restoration is between God and people. In Acts 3, Peter took advantage of an opportunity to tell his Israelite brethren about the realities of sin and forgiveness. In the verses just before we began reading, Peter reminded them that, when

Pilate gave them a chance to free Jesus, they instead asked to have a murderer set free. In no uncertain terms, Peter blamed them for rejecting “the Holy and Righteous One” and killing “the Author of life.” Their crucifixion of God’s Son left them guilty of great sin and separated them from God.

Fortunately, Peter also offered his Jewish hearers an opportunity of grace. If they would repent, he said, their sins could be wiped out. If they would turn to God, they could be refreshed with the presence of the Lord. Acts chapter three began with the healing of a lame man. Peter proclaimed that that miracle of healing, which they had all witnessed, was just a taste of God’s mighty power that could come upon the Jews if they would accept Jesus Christ as Messiah and be restored to God.

The restoration of *our* lives begins in this same spiritual place between us and God. So often we want other things first. We think that we don’t have time for God now; we have to earn a living. We don’t have time for God now; we have to take our kids to their lessons and activities. We don’t have time for God now; we have to remodel our house. We don’t have time for God now; we’ve got health problems to manage. The problem is that the to-do lists never stop. The universe of our lives will only become manageable when we allow our spirits to be restored to God first.

2—RESTORATION BETWEEN PEOPLE

After we’re reconciled with God, then the next step in universal restoration is overcoming the divisions between people. As Peter spoke about the rejection and death of Jesus at the hands of his fellow Jews, we are reminded that, originally, the controversy over Jesus was between different factions of Jews. Then they involved the Romans. As the centuries went on, and the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, Christians found it easy to return to their perception of Jews as “Jesus killers.” That was one of the reasons why the Nazis were able to do such horrific things. The Holocaust extermination of up to six million Jews happened because Christian people had been trained to think prejudicially of all Jews as the murderers of Christ. That’s why, in 1998, the Pope finally apologized to Jewish people for the lack of Catholic opposition to Hitler before and during World War 2. Last week’s shooting in a

California synagogue--done by an evangelical Christian—shows that we still have much work to do in this area of overcoming mass characterizations, stereotypes, and prejudices that promote division and death.

Our United Methodist emphasis on Native American Sunday also reminds us of the terrible crimes our ancestors committed against Native Americans. Our Euro-American relatives infected Native Americans with diseases, stole their land, wiped out their buffalo, broke treaty after treaty, and forced them onto desolate, undesirable reservations. Thus Native Americans today have one of the highest rates of alcoholism and diabetes, the highest rate of teenage suicide, and the lowest rate of educational achievement. Consequently, we need to repent of our societal sins against them and try to overcome the divisions that separate us.

Several years ago, our United Methodist denomination took some big steps in the right direction. After years of carefully building relationships, in 2014, our Rocky Mountain Conference visited the Sand Creek Massacre site in southeastern Colorado and expressed sorrow for the Methodist attitudes and actions that were involved in that horrific event 150 years prior. In 2016, our United Methodist General Conference continued and expanded that repentance for acts of violence against indigenous peoples all over the world.

Those institutional acts of repentance were very important. And it's necessary that we each continue to do whatever we can to overcome the many types of prejudices and inequalities that divide people. God's will for us isn't that we oppose and hurt one another. Instead, as we read in Acts 3:25, God's goal is that we would live in such a way that all the families of the earth can be blessed.

3—RESTORATION OF CREATION

So, if universal restoration begins firstly with our individual relationships with God, and secondly includes our relationships with other people, the third aspect of universal restoration is living in harmony with creation. Peter didn't spell this out in Acts 3, but we definitely see it in the Noah's Ark

story. How people live can have serious consequences for the earth. The Apostle Paul also speaks of this idea of universal restoration in his Letter to the Romans, where he writes about the Christian hope that one day all creation will be set free from its bondage to decay (8:21). In Colossians, chapter one, Paul or one of his followers wrote that, through Christ—the first-born of all creation—God is going to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth. As stewards of the earth which God created, it's our responsibility to work with and for God's purposes to bring about this universal restoration.

We used to do a lot of things out of ignorance, but now we know better. We know that throwing trash out of our car windows isn't good for the environment. We know that pouring chemicals and human waste into our waterways is a sure way to destroy life. We know that, whenever possible, it's best to reduce, reuse, and recycle. And, even though it's been controversial in the past, there's no uncertainty now: At least 97% of climate scientists agree that temperatures are rising, global climate change is happening, species are at risk of losing their habitats, ice is melting, island nations and coastal cities are in danger of flooding, and these changes are largely a result of human behavior.

Food shortages, global migration, and national security risks will increase in the years ahead unless we make important changes. The only way we will be able to pass along a healthy earth for our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren is if we take serious steps now to limit our carbon emissions by moving away from our dependency on fossil fuels. This is not a one-sided political opinion. This is a fact that we, as Christians, have a responsibility to face. Caring for the earth is an essential component of God's will and desire for universal restoration.

CONCLUSION

A few weeks ago on a Wednesday evening, when some of us were coming and going from the church, we saw a double rainbow in the sky. In the Noah story, God gave the rainbow as a promise that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood. Today, God is calling us to participate in that covenant of universal restoration. Will each one of us individually repent of our sin and be reconciled to

God? Will we do all in our power to overcome prejudices and divisions between people? And will we commit ourselves to the care of the earth? If so, we'll be able to survive and rejoice like Noah did, and we'll be able to join with Peter in eager anticipation of the day of universal restoration.