

SERMON TITLE: "Universal Restoration"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 6:11-14, 19a, 22a and Acts 3:17-26
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 21, 2024 (Earth Day), at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Tomorrow is Earth Day. 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 creation, 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," and "the time of the restoration of all things." All these different phrases convey the Christian belief that, in raising Jesus 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 for the release of the murderer Barabbas. Instead of Jesus, they chose a criminal. In no uncertain terms, Peter blamed

his fellow citizens 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, this spiritual violation was matched by God’s mercy and grace. Peter told them that, if they would repent, 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. We don’t have time for God now; we have to watch the news or a sporting event. We don’t have time for God now; we’d rather express our human anger, frustration, or greed first and seek the way of God later. The problem is that our human 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, we’re reminded that, originally, the controversy over Jesus was between different factions of Jews. Some believed Jesus was the Messiah from God and followed him, others weren’t sure, and some strongly opposed him. Then the Jewish officials involved the Romans who had the authority to execute Jesus and persecute his followers. This created animosity between Christians and the Romans. As

the centuries went on, however, and the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion, Christians found it easy to return to their original perception of the Jews as the killers of Jesus. That perception was one of the reasons why, hundreds of years later, 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 for nearly two thousand years to think prejudicially of all Jews as the murderers of Christ. And 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.

As we can so easily see from the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, human conflict is a pervasive problem. Even deeply religious people easily perpetuate human misery.

In our church's April newsletter, you received a donation envelope for Native American ministries. That denominational offering helps support ministries like the Blackfeet United Methodist Parish in Browning, Montana, and the Native Grace Fellowship in Cortez, Colorado. This annual offering is an effort to repent and overcome some of our Methodist complicity in violence against indigenous peoples in North America. Our Euro-American ancestors, in general, infected Native Americans with diseases, stole their land, wiped out their buffalo, broke treaty after treaty, and forced them onto desolate, undesirable reservations. Methodist people were specifically implicated in the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in SE Colorado, as that horrific act of violence against women, children, and elderly men was led by Colonel John Chivington who was a Methodist minister and former district superintendent. That's why, at the 2012 and 2016 General Conferences, United Methodists made significant efforts to apologize to native people.

Institutional acts of repentance are very important in restoring human relationships. And, individually, it's necessary that we each continue to do whatever we can to overcome the many types of prejudice 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 first with our relationships with God, and secondly includes our relationships with other people, then the third aspect of universal restoration is living in harmony with all of creation. Peter didn't spell this out in Acts 3, but we definitely see it in the Noah's Ark story in Genesis. 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 firstborn 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: Climate scientists agree that global climate change is happening, temperatures are rising, ice is melting, island nations and coastal cities are in danger of flooding, species of plants and animals are at risk of losing their habitats, 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 dependence 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

I think most of us find joy in seeing a colorful rainbow in the sky and remembering God's promise to restore life on the earth. In the news of the recent eclipse, I read about what kind of colors people would see as the moon totally covered the sun. Due to the way our human eyes work, and something called the Purkinje (pur-kin-jee) effect, when the sun is bright, the colors red, yellow, and orange seem most vibrant to us. But as the sun darkens, our eyes are better adapted to see shades of purple, blue, and green. At nightfall and dawn, the change in light and colors is so gradual that we don't usually notice. But, on April 8, those people who witnessed the total eclipse happen in just four minutes were able to notice a dramatic shift in the colors around them. In history, eclipses have often been interpreted as ominous and scary events. But for those who witnessed the April 8 total eclipse, it was as if God gave them a full spectrum of colors as a rainbow sign that all would be well.

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.