

## From Rev. Willie J. Smith



This is the 56th anniversary of Earth Day —of the original in 1970. And this year’s Earth Day theme is, “Our Power, Our Planet which is both timely and pressing. As the effects of climate change continue to mount, the stakes and concerns are high.

What does the Bible have to say about all this? Quite a bit, as it turns out, from Genesis to

Revelation.

The two creation stories in Genesis, different as they are, share a common central theme: humanity as the guardian and gardener of creation.

In the first story, we’re cast as custodians, created in God’s “image and likeness” precisely so we can be creatively hospitable to the world God has just creatively, hospitably made. Accordingly, God grants humankind “dominion” — but only in the context of this larger call to hospitality and care. “Let them have dominion over” may just as well be translated, “Let them have custody of...” or “Let them have responsibility for...” or “Let them generously, creatively host...” Literally, the Hebrew in Genesis 1:26 is “Let them rule over” — but remember, the first 25 verses of Genesis have just laid out in vivid detail what kind of “rule” the story’s author has in mind: God’s graceful, generous creation of a beautiful home, a household of creatures meant to live and thrive. And this generous, hospitable God is the One in whose image human beings are made.

Likewise, in the second creation story we’re cast as gardeners, created by God expressly so the Garden of Delight may flourish (“Eden” likely means “delight”), full of fruit trees and countless other creatures. The story of humanity’s fall away from God, then, is the story of our fall away from our calling as creation’s gardener. Think of it this way: according to Genesis 2-3, a primary consequence of human sin is our loss of this original role, this “tilling and keeping” of the earth Genesis 2:15. And salvation means our return to it!

The Noah story, at its heart, is a reprise of creation itself, a “do-over” precipitated by the fact that the world had become “filled with violence” Genesis 6:11. For the authors of

Genesis, accounts of a primordial, devastating, divinely-caused flood were all over the Near Eastern world, and so the existence of such a flood was taken for granted. The open questions were: *What does the flood say about God? About creation? About us?*

To ancient eyes and ears, three things would have stood out about how the Noah story answers these three questions. First, that the waters rose not because God loves violence, but on the contrary, because God was so aggrieved by the epidemic of violence on earth. Second, that after the flood, God makes a covenant with the earth and all its creatures (including but not limited to humanity), forswearing such destruction forever.

And third, that the human role in the drama is a decisive return to our original calling: to serve and protect God's creatures, building an ark to house them, gathering food to feed them, and thus preserving the world's biodiversity — in short, “to keep them alive with you... so that they may abound on the earth” .

But wait, there's more! When the authors of Leviticus and Deuteronomy envisioned the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year, they included domestic and wild animals, and even the land itself, as beneficiaries of these times of rest . Likewise, the Psalms are full of passages underscoring that the earth and its many creatures belong to God, and that God delights in them and cares for them every day.

Jesus, too, picks up these themes: every creature, he insists, even the wildflowers and the smallest sparrows, are under God's active, loving care ([Matt 6:25-29](#); [Luke 12:6](#)). Jesus repeatedly warns against the perils of hoarding money and possessions, arguing that what money is for (and by extension, what economies are for) is building up the health of the wider beloved community. And finally, near the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus completes and sums up his public teaching with a vivid, haunting, famous parable.

What Jesus doesn't say in this parable is telling. He doesn't conclude his years of teaching by saying, “In the end, the distinguishing mark between the sheep and the goats will be that the sheep have all the right theological opinions,” or that “the sheep are generous to their inner circles of friends and family,” or that “the sheep attend church twice a week.” Instead, he says the sheep do six specific things: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome foreigners, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit people in prison ([Matt 25:31-46](#)). Theological opinions and kindness to family and attending worship each has its place, but in the final analysis, what matters most is doing these six specific things, serving these six groups. As Matthew tell it, that's the note Jesus ends on, the final chord in the concerto.

And the climate crisis, if we allow it to continue, will devastate each of these six groups — indeed, it's already doing so today. Extreme weather, famine, and disease threaten the impoverished and disenfranchised first of all and most of all. We are currently living through

a refugee emergency around the world, but the climate crisis promises to create waves of desperate migration that will dwarf today's challenges — and that, in turn, will intensify authoritarian politics, incarceration rates, and the likelihood of conflict. When it comes to “the least of these,” the climate crisis is indeed the perfect storm. Taking Jesus seriously means confronting the crisis with vigor, resolve, imagination, and commitment.

Finally, near the end of the Book of Revelation, the prophet poetically describes a “new heaven and new earth” — but strikingly, the vision isn't of somewhere else, some new paradise set apart from the planet we know and love. Rather, the vision is of *heaven descending down to earth*. The “New Jerusalem” doesn't entail leaving the old one behind. God made and dearly loves the Earth, and made us to help protect it, to help serve it, and ultimately, by God's grace, to help restore it: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”