



## **Iowa IPL Earth Words Sermon Contest Honorable Mention**

### **“New Heaven, New Earth”**

**By Reverend William Lovin**

**Congregational United Church of Christ**

**Iowa City, IA**

**Presented Sunday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

#### ***Readings: Revelation 21:1-4, Colossians 3:1-17***

I’ve been thinking about how far we’ve come in claiming our calling as stewards of the earth and how the life of faith is especially important in light of the great challenges that we now face.

Forty years ago a lot of the students at Richwoods High School in Peoria, Illinois, took April 22nd as a day off from school. We went over to Bradley University for the first Earth Day celebration. With environmental awareness just beginning, we did what any high school students would do given such an opportunity. We hung out on campus; we listened to the rock bands that played throughout the day. And occasionally, when there wasn’t anything else to do, we wandered through the exhibits that were set up.

I guess you could say we took Earth Day kind of lightly.

I do remember one display, however. There was an aquarium that showed what the murky Illinois River looked like at the time. Growing up in a city along that river, I knew even without looking that it was a vile mess. There was another aquarium that showed what the river would look like if the pollution continued unabated. It went from very bad to much worse. And there was a third aquarium that offered a vision of what the river could be if action was taken to clean it up and to decrease the pollution that was fouling the water.

The good news is that forty years later the Illinois River and many of our nation’s waterways are in much better condition because of clean water legislation. And our air is better because of the Clean Air Act.

Around same time as that first Earth Day, a guest speaker came to my church and talked about pollution. She spoke about caring for the earth. As with the event at Bradley, I don’t remember much that she said. One thing stayed with me, however, in part because it seemed so ridiculous at the time. She suggested that we *recycle* items. Imagine: bundle up newspapers, flatten cans, and take them someplace so that they could be turned into other products. It was unheard of, and many in the congregation voiced all sorts of reasons why this just wouldn’t happen.

Forty years later I look back and realize that for at least the past twenty years, I’ve been recycling. You probably have been doing the same. Sometimes we recycled because it was required by the city in which we lived. Sometimes we did it, well, just because it was the right thing to do. And when we

bought our house in Iowa City a few years ago, it came with its own recycling bin. What seemed preposterous has become habit.

After forty years we have cleaner air and water. After forty years we recycle. All this happened because we found the will to act.

After forty years, Earth Day has supersized into Earth Week, or, as some posters around town have proclaimed, Earth Month. Along the way, the focus of our concern moved from pollution to global warming—or, to put it more precisely, climate change.

We face a far different situation today than we did forty years ago. As Bill McKibben tells us in his new book *Eaarth*, “Global warming is no longer a threat at all.” Now that sounds pretty good until we read his next sentence. “Global warming is no longer a threat at all. *It’s our reality.*”

The polar ice cap and inland glaciers and the snowpack in the American West are all melting—now.

The levels of the oceans are rising and they are warmer and more acidic—now.

As we have learned first hand, storms and flooding are becoming stronger and more frequent—now.

At the same time, parts of the world, including the American Southwest are becoming permanent dustbowls—now.

We thought that our children and grandchildren would be the ones to deal with the effects of climate change. And they will. Now we are slowly realizing that we too will have to learn to address these radical changes. Climate change is our problem—now.

McKibben puts it this way: “The earth has changed in profound ways, ways that have already taken us out of the sweet spot where humans so long thrived. We’re every day less the oasis and more the desert. The world hasn’t ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don’t quite know it yet...It’s a different place. A different planet. It needs a new name. *Eaarth*.” He spells that with two “a’s” to suggest this new planet is similar to—and yet different from—the planet on which we grew up, the planet with which we were familiar.

We are challenged to find ways to live on this new planet—now *and* in the coming decades.

We are challenged to find ways to live in this new reality—now *and* in the coming decades.

Science, economics, and politics will all be of help as we navigate the new world in which we live.

Scientists continue to sound the alarm. They warn us of an increase of about 9 degrees in the average temperature in this century. This will be accompanied by “feedback effects” such as an increase in methane, another greenhouse gas, released from beneath the warming tundra, which will only make matters worse.

With the help of economists we are facing the high financial cost of climate change, which will most likely make the United States and the rest of the world poorer than they would be otherwise. With the help of economists we also understand that moves to drastically reduce carbon emissions can be economically viable.

Unlike forty years ago, however, we seem to lack the political will to take action to effectively deal with these new realities.

Science tells us of our problem. Economics speaks to us of possibilities. Politics offers the yet unrealized hope of large-scale action.

And faith can give us the vision and the will we need to live fully in world in which climate change is already the new reality.

We find an unlikely yet helpful starting point in those words of Paul to the early Christians in Colossae. “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

On first hearing, those words might embarrass us more than they encourage us. They sound more like the cause of our problem rather than the solution. For we recognize, do we not, that there has been within Christianity a mistaken though powerful train of thought that denied the importance of life on earth, that put heaven on our minds, and led us to ignore if not abuse the earth since it will pass away. Setting our minds on things that are above, we polluted the air and the water. And while we have been able to reduce some of that pollution, our general carelessness has led to such high concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that we have passed the tipping point. We paved paradise and only now recognize, as the song says, that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.

Why then would we even read, let alone heed, a call to set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth?

Listen further.

As Paul begins to elaborate on what this means, he does not focus our attention on angels or afterlife or heavenly glory. He talks instead about how we live with each other in the day to day reality of our earthly existence.

Paul suggests that we get some new clothes—stripping off the dishonesty and the idolatrous greed in which we have clothed ourselves for so long. We have not been honest about the destruction and permanent devastation we are bringing to our world. Greed has let quick profit take precedence over long-term care of the environment. One prayer of confession puts it this way: “The profit and pleasures we pursue lay waste to the land and pollute the seas.”

Take off those old clothes, Paul tells us, and put on honesty, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and love. We’re all in the same boat, he says. There is no longer Greek and 3, slave and free. We face a problem that is global in scope. To find solutions we need to see both our common predicament and our common human worth.

This is to say that setting our minds on the things that are above will shape our actions on this earth that has changed so dramatically. Our own transformation from death to life—being raised with Christ— informs our efforts to bring new life and transformation out of the devastation we have brought to our planet.

In her powerful essay, “Wilderness,” Marilynne Robinson tells us, “Unless we can reestablish peace and order as values, and learn to see our own well-being in our neighbor’s prosperity, we can do nothing at all for the rain forests and the koala bears.” In this new world we are thrown back upon each other. We might once again see the wisdom in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The word “religion,” you will remember, comes from a Latin word that means “to bind together again.”

On this new “Eearth” religion takes on a renewed significance. Religion binds us not only to those with whom we agree, not only to those with whom we share common beliefs. It creates powerful bonds that hold us together with all people as God’s creatures.

The simple religious practices by which we express our faith—worship, prayer, giving, hospitality, service—are ways that we reconnect with each other and with our neighbors. As we live out our faith, we rediscover the common bonds of our humanity.

The changes in the global climate come at a time when fossil fuel is becoming scarcer, when more land is less able to be cultivated. Bill McKibben suggests that in the future we face agriculture will be practiced on a smaller scale and energy provided in more decentralized ways. The new reality in which we live will make local communities more important. And our religious faith can help make those communities just and peaceful in a time of uncertainty. Our religious faith can help make those communities open and humane in a time of fear. Our religious faith can help make those communities places of equality and respect in a time of change.

The vision that faith gives us is not of some heavenly afterlife. In faith we look toward and pray for the coming of God’s realm, in which the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The ancient visionary John of Patmos wrote in his Revelation, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth...” Depending on how you understand those words, this world will be so transformed by the work of God or by the followers of Christ that chaos and death will be no more. Either way, that vision carries the sense that *this* present world and what we do *in it* and *to it* matters.

In faith we understand that this new creation is already in the works. Indeed the message of Easter is that in the resurrection of Jesus the Creator God began a new creation. We are a part of that new creation.

The new “Eearth” that we have created is not a reflection of God’s desire for creation. But this is where we find ourselves. We still have a unique calling and responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. Yes, we have failed tremendously in that responsibility. But this earth is still in our care.

Our Easter faith still speaks to us. Since we have been raised with Christ, let us set our minds on the things that are above. With honesty, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and especially with love for each other and for this creation, let us find new ways to be stewards of this new “Eearth.”