



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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**5th Sunday of Easter**

**April 24, 2016**

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### **“This Old House”**

*(Rev. 21:1-5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’” (Rev. 21:1-5).*

**COLLECT:** O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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I went down to St. Louis a couple of weeks ago to visit our daughters, both of whom are going to school there. Stephanie is moving off campus this spring and will be renting an upstairs room in the home of Pastor Bob and Sara Bernhardt. (Sara's maiden name Schempf, daughter of Pastor and Karen Schempf.) In any event, Bob and Sara live on the very same block where Gail and I used to live when I was a student at the seminary. At the time, it was a gritty neighborhood. (That's why we lived there. It was cheap.) Its glory days were long gone. Crime was going up. Home values were going down, and the homes themselves were deteriorating. So I was surprised and delighted a few weeks ago to see how the old neighborhood has come roaring back. There were dumpsters in front of quite a few homes, because homeowners are gutting their places down to the bones and renovating. New wiring, new plumbing, central air, sanding down the old wooden floors. People are paying attention to their landscaping again. The whole neighborhood is experiencing new birth. What used to be a grungy and dark tavern across the street from our old apartment has been turned into a sunny and bright little neighborhood café. There's something wonderful about old buildings with good bones being renovated and restored.

In our text, that's happening on a grand scale. In our text, the universe is being renovated and restored.

Let's see how it came about. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth not because he had to, but because he loves to create. Any God who created over 12,000 different species of ants loves to create. 30,000 species of fish. 16,000 species of mushrooms, 40,000

species of crustaceans, and so on. We have a God who loves physical matter, a God who loves to create. And of all the galaxies, and of all the solar systems in those galaxies, and of all the planets swirling around their star, the only planet we know of that God has lavished his creative attention on is this little planet called earth.

Because he loves his creation, he also created man, the pinnacle of his creative work, to look after his creation and help it flourish. So man is not a weed species on earth, or earth's worst pest, as he's been called. That was never God's intended role for us, not then, not now. We were given the task to work the garden and keep it, to help his creation flourish.

You know how the story goes. The serpent beguiles Adam and Eve, and tells them if they want, they can become like God too. And they actually make a run at it. They rebel against God. Of course, it doesn't work. In fact, life becomes hard for them because all of creation becomes unglued. Now there's hostility between humans, between animals, between humans and animals, between humans and God. As man's sin and wickedness increase, death and decay increase as well.

Man still wants to be like God. We see that throughout history in his ambition to become powerful and wealthy and feared. Consider the Tower of Babel, for instance, where man wants to make a name for himself and build a tower to the heavens. This narcissism isn't unknown to at least one of our presidential candidates, right? And it's not unknown to you and me in our striving for more power, more wealth, more knowledge, more everything.

Yet God, knowing man will never be able to save himself, has a plan to save us and his creation, and it requires God himself to come rescue us. He comes to rescue the entire creation, but he begins with us, with man. Why? Because the problem began with us.

Do you see the irony? For all human history we've been trying to become like God. But to save us, God becomes like us, as one of us. We've been trying to become

filthy rich, but to save us, Jesus becomes poor. We've been trying to become powerful, but to save us, Jesus becomes weak and vulnerable. We've been trying to become immortal, but to save us, Jesus takes on our sin and becomes mortal, for the wages of sin is death.

And all the while as Jesus walks the earth, he affirms the goodness of creation. Flesh must be good if the Lord became it. He shows us what man is supposed to look like, without the sin. And he doesn't talk about the time his soul will finally be freed of his body. No, he teaches his disciples about the resurrection of the body, that our bodies, though they die, yet they shall be made alive again, restored, transformed, never to die again. No one else thought like this. No one in the era of Jesus thought of the physical world as good. What he said of creation and what his early followers said of creation was radically counter cultural. For much of the world then and now, the goal is to climb some kind of ladder up to God and get away from the messiness of earth.

That's not the way Jesus lived or talked. And as God's Son on earth, he doesn't shrink from the physical. He's not above it all. He doesn't meditate himself into an other-worldly place. He gets his hands dirty. He was a carpenter. Let the philosophers argue about ideas; God's Son was happy to play and work with wood and nails and tools. I suspect built new homes, but probably transformed some old homes as well, made them like new, because he was in the business of restoring his whole creation. So he also heals the sick. He raises the dead. He feeds the hungry. He calms the storm.

But Jesus didn't want to heal just a few 1st century Galileans. He wants to restore a world in which sickness is impossible. He doesn't want to raise just Jairus from the dead, and the son of the widow of Nain, only for them to die again. He wants to renovate the earth in such a way that all are raised from the dead, and where death is impossible, in fact, unthinkable. He doesn't want to give a little food so that a few thousand people don't go home hungry on one

day, only to face hunger again the next. No, he wants to restore the creation and renew it so that it freely gives its bounty again, like it did in Eden.

And the path for this transformation requires sacrifice, his sacrifice on the cross. He didn't look forward to that as the ultimate release of his spirit. No he prayed fervently to be spared from that death. We've come to think of death as quite natural; for God's Son, holy, without sin and powerful, there's nothing more unnatural. Yet for you and for me and for all creation he dies, he dies to redeem his whole creation.

Whenever God judges, he judges through creation. In Genesis 3, the creation becomes unglued. There's the flood. There are the plagues in Egypt. There's darkness at the cross. When God saves, he uses creation there too. He splits the Red Sea. He sends manna and quail. He provides water from the rock. Then, of course, the living waters of baptism. Grain and grapes in the Lord's Supper.

Remember, he created us (mankind) on the 6th day. He also died for us on the 6th day. He rose on the 8th day, the first day of the new creation. And so if you look, many baptismal fonts have eight sides to them, because that's where we have the first day of our new creation.

Now as his people, he doesn't want us forever huddling in this sanctuary. No, he sends us out into creation to live out our lives in our vocations. Little bursts of new creation as we serve others through our vocations. Little bursts of renewal and restoration through us. We too are charged with taking care of his creation, being stewards of the earth. And we are to do this until he comes again with power and great might.

On that day, the heavens and the earth will be transformed and glorified, restored, renovated. I don't think the Day of the Lord will be an annihilation by fire, but rather a refining (like silver), a renovation, turning old to new. Much like his own body, so also with our bodies, (even if they're already back to the dust), he will raise them and put them back together again, atom to atom, cell to cell, bone to

bone as in Ezekiel's vision. He will give us the breath of life.

So also with this planet. In our text, God says, "Behold, I am making all things new." What will the new heaven and earth look like? Often we think of it as a cloudy place, ethereal, airy and intangible. But that doesn't sound like any fun at all, and moreover, that doesn't sound like God having any fun. Remember, we have a God who loves to create. He delights in matter, in physical stuff. In our text, it says the first heaven and the first earth will pass away, and there will be a new heaven and new earth. Certain things will truly disappear, like sin and death and corruption. Therefore it says "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." So certain things will disappear, but many other things in heaven will feel very much like earth, only immeasurably better.

Finally, notice the movement of the text. It is not up, up and away to heaven, our spirits finally being freed from the flesh. But the movement in Scripture is of God coming down to earth. "And I saw the new Jerusalem (that is, the people of God) coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'" Heaven is where God is, and God is saying his dwelling place is with us.

God doesn't save us by plucking us off this earth. He rescues us always by coming down to earth: in his Old Testament theophanies and promises, in his Son Jesus, in his Word, in the waters of baptism, in bread and wine. It's always a downward motion. And so also on that day, the Day of the Lord, it's a downward motion. That day is when he will restore, refine, transform us to be the creatures he intended us to be. No more sin, therefore no more death or mourning or crying or pain. No more tears.

Very often as Christians we look forward to dying and being with Jesus. But that's just the appetizer. The main course is being raised from the dead. The main course is having our bodies restored, renovated, made new, transformed, to enjoy the new earth that has been restored, renovated made new. That's the main course. We will be in the flesh, and we will see Jesus in the flesh, face to face, new earth, new soil, new air, new trees, the new creation, and God only knows how many new species of this, that, and the other.

“Behold, I am making all things new!” Thanks be to God. Amen.

