

Church of the Crossroads  
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 30, 2006  
Neal MacPherson

SIGNS

Ephesians 3:14-21  
John 6:1-21

One day last week, in the early morning, I helped a family scatter the ashes of a son and brother into the ocean off the sea wall at the Kewalo Boat Harbor. One of the brothers of the man who had died had participated in Crossroads during the interim ministry of Edith Wolfe, and that is why I was asked me to help. It was a beautiful morning, sunlit sky and blue wide ocean, with a number of surfers riding the waves in the distance.

Following the scattering of the ashes, one of the brothers, not the one who had called me, approached me and began to engage in a conversation. He asked me if I believed in the “doctrine” (as he put it) “of the rapture.” The rapture refers to a single verse in scripture, found in 1 Thessalonians, Chapter 4. I will read the verse and the one that precedes it.

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17

“No,” I said to my newfound conversation partner, “I don’t believe in the rapture.” And I added, “I don’t think it is very important when it comes to the Christian Gospel.” “Well,” he said, “isn’t it true that the world is coming to an end. Look at all the wars that are taking place. Aren’t they predicted in the Book of Revelation? Look at what is happening to the earth. Isn’t it being destroyed by global warming? Aren’t all these things in God’s plan? Shouldn’t we be prepared to meet the Lord in the air?”

I paused, took a deep breath, trying to remain calm (which I did), and gently said, “None of that interests me. The person who wrote about that

was expecting the immediate return of Jesus to the earth. But he did not return. And besides, I cannot believe that that God would ever willfully destroy something that God loves, do you?" He looked at me with a curious look. I went on, "When God created the earth, God said that it was good. After the great flood, God promised never again to destroy the earth. And in John's Gospel, it is said that God loved the world so much that God gave God's own son so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. I do not think that God would destroy the world God loves. We might, however." My conversation partner was open to what I said. I ended by gesturing to the beautiful ocean and sky and the surfers riding the waves, the ashes of his brother now mingling with the water, and said, "We must do all we can to save this earth," and then I suggested that he go and see the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and invited him to come and see me anytime he wished.

I'll have to admit that I am resolved to be an earth bound human being. I have no interest in being with the Lord if it means the destruction of the earth. I want to believe that the physical earth will be here for my children and grandchildren long after I have departed. I sometimes think of my eventual death and the deep sadness I will feel when I am faced with the task of saying farewell to this fair earth and those I love. It will not be easy for any of us.

May I add that the whole notion of the rapture is not the only earth-denying spirituality out there. There are many spiritual paths that serve to lift us from the earth rather than connect us to it. Spiritual paths that employ the words "higher consciousness" and promote mind over matter techniques are among them. These are spiritual paths that are Gnostic in nature. Like the Gnostics of old, these paths do not seem to be satisfied with our earthbound nature. The Gnostics devalued the world of matter in order to elevate the world of spirit. In the newly published Gnostic *Gospel of James*, Jesus asks James to betray him, so that Jesus might be freed from the shackles of his human body, a body that he took on temporarily (but not really) so that he could complete his teachings.

Some of the ancient Gnostics, I have learned, liked to read the Gospel of John from which this morning's Gospel is taken. The Gospel of John has been called the most spiritual of all the Gospels. And it's true that there is something very mystical and ethereal about this Gospel. It speaks of being born of the Spirit. At many points, the stories seem to defy matter. Water is

turned into wine. A Capernaum official's son is healed as well as a paralytic by the pool of Bethzatha. Five thousand are fed from five loaves of barley and two fish. Jesus walks on water. A man blind from birth is given sight, and Lazarus is raised from the dead. From all of these signs (seven in all) spiritual truths are brought forth. Through these physical occurrences, these signs, we come to know Jesus as the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection and the Life. The signs certainly do point to spiritual truth.

At the same time, the Gnostics, even if they did read the Gospel of John, did not accept it as authoritative for their lives. They could not quite accept the words of the opening prologue in which it is said that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This is one of the great affirmations of the incarnation, that God became one of us, fully human, fully physical.

Also, in the Gospel of John, this most spiritual of all the four Gospels to be found in the canon of the New Testament, there is an amazing earthiness that comes through. The story of the water being turned into wine arises from a lack of wine at a wedding reception. To heal the man born blind, Jesus takes mud and smears on the man's eyes. The food that feeds the five thousand is two fish and five barley loaves (barley was the food of the poor). In the story of the raising of Lazarus, there is even mention of the stench of the dead body. In John's Gospel the realm of the physical gives rise to spiritual truth. On the one hand, we come to know Jesus as the Light of the World and the Bread of Life, and the Resurrection and the Life. On the other hand, we are left with images of fish and barley loaves and mud and the stench of a dead body. In John's Gospel, the things of earth and the things of the spirit are related; they cannot be separated.

And so, I will continue to be earthbound. I am not interested in spiritual truth apart from life as we know it and live it in the earth. To obtain spiritual truth, we do not want to have to leave the earth, deny the earth, or see the destruction of the world. Spirituality, for me, must be earthbound.

Of course, I speak for myself, but I have a hunch that I may also speak for many of us. Life lived fully here and now – that is what gives rise to spiritual truth.

The problem is that we fail to make the connection between the life of the spirit and our daily, physical lives. We tend to go through life and do not see the spiritual truths that are there to be seen, if our vision were not so

blurred. A week ago Saturday, when we were digging, weeding, and raking at the Ulupō Heiau, our hands dirty and our feet muddy, we had this sense that we were truly caring for God's creation. Would that we could always have that insight. When we as a congregation welcome the families of Family Promise into our church home for a week at a time and do all the daily work that is necessary to feed and house them, we are keenly aware that we are doing something that Jesus would do, and that our service points to God's own welcoming hospitality extended to all people. Would that we could always have that insight. Each time we eat and share time with others; each time we accept one another for who we are; each time we forgive one another, we are embodying the love of God. Would that we could always have that insight. Would that we, in the words of this morning's reading from Ephesians, have "the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:19-19)

In truth, all that we do in our daily life and work here on this fair earth is fraught with spiritual meaning. We do not need to leave the earth behind in order to gain spiritual insight. We just need to live life as fully and completely as we can, by the grace of God. This is exactly what Jesus desires for those who believe in him. As he says in John's Gospel, "I have come so that they may have life and life abundantly."

My friends, let us commit ourselves always to the task of nurturing an earthbound spirituality in our lives, both individually and communally. For then, it may be that one day the words of the prophet Isaiah will be fulfilled, that the time will indeed come when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:9) May it be so. Amen.