

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, July 9, 2006

The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett

How does the promise that we will be saved from sin and death through faith relate to the destiny of the whole creation? Is the rest of the creation also to be saved?

Many common perspectives on salvation seem to ignore or discard the creation. Some people think that the essence of the Christian hope is that when we die we will go to heaven. Salvation is in heaven, apart from the creation. Some versions of the Christian hope envision a cataclysmic ending to history in which the creation will be destroyed.

These two popular views both imply that the Christian hope doesn't have anything to do with the creation. In the "die and go to heaven scenario," the creation is left behind. Salvation is envisioned as being completely "spiritual" and devoid of all that we enjoyed on earth. In the "all will be destroyed" scenario, the physical creation is gone and it is not quite clear where eternity will be spent.

The epistle today gives us a more accurate sense of the place of the creation in the Christians hope. St. Paul writes, "The creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now" (Romans 8:18f.).

What the epistle says is this: The whole created order is waiting for the return of Christ when God will reveal those who belong to him. The creation is waiting because, on the day of resurrection, when our transformation into the image of Christ is completed, the creation itself will undergo its own transformation. It will become what God intended it to be in the beginning.

In other words, the Christian hope is not for an escape from the creation into some spiritual existence in heaven, nor does it include the annihilation of the creation. The Christian hope is for life in a redeemed and renewed body to be lived in a redeemed and renewed creation. Redemption for man will include redemption for the whole creation.

Thus, redemption reverses the effects of the Fall. The fall of man affected the whole creation. The original sin not only severed the harmonious relationship between man and his maker, it also undermined the beauty and order of the whole created order. Just as man became subject to sin and death, so the creation became subject to what the epistle calls the "bondage of corruption."

This bondage refers to the cycle of decay and death in nature. Nature reaches its full flower in spring, but dies every summer. This mirrors the human experience. We reach our full flower of age, then we begin to decay and die. We flower again through our children—just as nature is renewed every spring—but they are subject to the same futility. Just as we long to rise above this bondage to death, so the whole created order, St. Paul tells us, longs to break free from decay and reach the glory that God intends for it.

This means that the new heavens and the new earth that will come about through the return of Christ will have a sense of continuity with the life we know now. The life we enjoy in our bodies, in the

worship of God, in relationships with others, in a created world that reflects the glory of the Creator, will continue on in the world to come.

What will be gone is evil. As Revelation says, “There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (21:4).

This sense of continuity is important if we are to view the Christian hope as something desirable. Many people talk about heaven in terms that don’t provoke any real desire to be there. No normal person wants to float on a cloud playing a harp for all eternity. And no one is really anxious for a Second Coming that is seen as putting a complete end to the beauty of all that God made good.

St. Paul’s point in the epistle is that the whole creation shares our vocation to be redeemed. We will be saved not by being removed from the creation; we will be saved in the resurrection as the whole creation, ourselves and every other thing God made good, is brought to the completion, the end that God intends for it.

St. Paul says, “The whole creation groans and travails in labor...And we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly waiting for the adoption...the redemption of our bodies.” We groan inwardly in that we long for the life that was planted in us in baptism to grow to maturity and rise to new life in the resurrection. The creation also groans in expectation, longing also to participate in the resurrection, longing to rise above the cycle of decay and death and reflect the full glory of its creator.

Thus, we should know that our hope of resurrection is not only for new, Christ-like, incorruptible, immortal bodies; it is also for a renewed and glorious creation in which we are to live.