

“The Whole World In God’s Hands”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The famed 20th-century writer E.B. White, best-known, perhaps, for his children's classics *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*, once asked the following very penetrating question, "Who is there big enough to love the whole the planet?" It's not just an interesting question it seems to me, although it is. It's also a critical question. More nowadays perhaps than at any point in human history. Who is there big enough to love the whole planet? It's such a critically important question because our planet, all the animals and plants and peoples that inhabit our planet as well, desperately need love. The ecological crisis, it seems, grows worse every day. Our planet itself needs love. Just a couple of months ago, another island in the Pacific Ocean disappeared. And since 1970, fully 60% of the wild animals on our planet have disappeared. And while we're worshipping here this morning, if this is an average hour, while we're worshipping here this morning, three more species of plants or animals somewhere in the world will go extinct. Scientists tell us if this remarkable and dramatic loss of biodiversity continues, it may be before too long that our species, the human species, yeah, we're a species too, that the future of our species may well hang in the balance. Our planet needs love. The plants, and the animals, of course. And yes, the people.

There are 7.3 billion human beings now. This morning, about 1 billion of us lack adequate food and nutrition, including nearly 20% of the children in the United States of America, the richest country in the world, perhaps the richest country in the history of humankind. This morning, there are 25 million refugees on the planet. Yes, there are thousands land up on our southern border and thousands more within the United States, children and young people and families in detention centers, but millions more beyond those. And at a moment in human history when love is so desperately needed, the following headline appeared not too long ago in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Like a cancer to our society, hate has become part of everyday life." The words "Like a cancer to our society" are the words of Judge John Rainey as he sentenced a man to prison in Texas for burning down a Muslim mosque. And the article went on to document what it described, "Daily flashes of hate." Things that we hear about all the time. African-Americans targeted, shot, and killed. Synagogues burned and destroyed and people killed in the process. GLBTQI folk demeaned and assaulted on a regular basis. This last fall, in the month of October, fully 40 college campuses in the United States of America reported the presence of hate material. Signs, posters, and so on that were racist and hateful amid ecological threat and desperate human need and daily flashes of hate. E B White's question is all the more important and indeed crucial, "Who is there big enough to love the whole planet?" And friends, amid all the bad news, there is some good news. We know the answer to that question. God, our God, is big enough to love the whole planet. How do we know? It's simple. The Bible tells us so.

My favorite Psalm is not the one I read. My favorite psalm is actually Psalm 82, which is not a very familiar Psalm. You can track it down or later. But it's a psalm that new testament scholar John Dominic Crossan not too long ago called the single most important text in the entire Christian Bible. And Crossan says it's sort of important because this passage, in his opinion at least, articulates more clearly than any other biblical passage what it is that God wills for the world. In a word, it is justice. Defined as the psalm puts it, "Defined by attentiveness to and provision for the poor, the destitute, and the needy." In other words, biblically speaking, justice is not as we often think, giving people what they deserve. Biblically speaking, justice is giving people what they need. And if you read the psalm carefully, verse 5 in particular - look at it sometimes, now or later - it suggests that in the presence of persistent injustice, the whole world is threatened with chaos. Verse 5, "In the presence of injustice, the foundations of the earth shake." You see? And so Psalm 82 ends with a very brief but important prayer, "Arise, oh God. Establish justice on earth, for all the nations belong to you." Now get that, "All the nations belong to you," or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation known as *The Message*, "You, God, you've got the whole world in your hands."

God. The God of Israel. The God whom we Christians affirm was fleshed out in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Our God is big enough to love the whole planet, including every one of those 7.3 billion people who make up all the nations. This biblical portrayal of the one God who claims the whole human family as God's own and wills its wellbeing is what great 20th-century preacher William Sloane Coffin once called, "A saving vision." It's a saving vision because if we work out of this understanding of God, we won't destroy the planet and we won't hurt and destroy each other as we so often and so terribly seem to be inclined to do. This saving vision is not limited, of course, to Psalm 82 or the Book of Psalm. It pervades the entire Bible. Think about it for a minute. Where does the bible start? A lot of folks think the Bible should start with Jesus, but it doesn't. The bible starts not with Jesus, not with Abraham or Abraham, not with Moses. The Bible starts with Adam, which becomes Adam, if you turned it into a proper name, but Adam is simply the Hebrew word for humankind. So from the very beginning of our scripture, God lovingly invest God's self in a planet. Our planet, on which life is able to survive and thrive.

And at the very end of of Bible, the Book of Revelation reintroduces stuff from the early chapters of Genesis. The tree of life reappears in the final chapter of the Bible - notice that, sometime - and we're told it's for the healing of the nations. Remember the end of Psalm 82? "Arise, O God, judge the earth: for all the nations belong to you." That's what the Book of Revelation is about. It's not about the end of the world, as you might think, or have often been told. It's about the end of injustice and oppression in the world. It's about the restoration of creation, this creation, to a new heaven and a new earth. It's about the healing of the nations. The Book of Revelation is not a scary book, it's a saving vision of how God wants the world to be.

And in between those opening chapters of the Bible and those concluding chapters of the Bible, there are all kinds of manifestations of this saving vision. And I'm particularly drawn to the psalms, since I'm a psalms scholar, and I read Psalm 96 for you. So let's go back to that for a moment. And this is typical for the songs of praise throughout the Book of Psalms, notice who is invited to praise God, "Sing to the Lord, all the earth." You may have noticed the verb, tell, or if you're reading along, you'll see the verb, tell, in verse 2, but the word really means to share the good news. And with whom is the good news to be shared? With everyone, the nations. And later in Psalm 96, the families of the people are mentioned, and all the earth is mentioned again, and the nations come into view again in verse 10, where they are to be told the good news, that the Lord is king. In other words, the whole world, the planet, belongs to God. And it is, according to the psalm, "Is firmly established." And why? Well, because God has come. God has come to do justice with righteousness.

And because God has come to establish justice on earth, and because God is big enough to love the whole planet, it's not surprising that the celebration that greets God's arrival is nothing short of creation-wide. It's not just the nations. That is, not just human beings that celebrate God's arrival, it's also the heavens and the earth and the sea and the field and all the trees of the forest, singing for joy. God's got the whole world in God's hand. Our God is big enough to love the whole planet. And because our God is so big and so loving, and we might say so secure in God's own identity, our God has chosen to share God's power with us. That's what another of my favorite psalms, Psalm 8, is all about. I'm not going to read the whole psalm, but it alludes to Genesis, chapter 1, at several points, and the middle of the psalm reads like this, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them [mortals?] that you care for them, yet you have made them little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the work of your hands. God trusts us enough, God loves us enough to share God's power with us. To be sure, as Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall puts it, "This is God's great risk." Because given freedom and power we can choose not to obey. We can choose to disobey. And of course humankind has chosen regularly and does choose regularly to disobey God. But you see what the gift of dominion means. It means that God, our God, expects us to be big enough to love the whole planet as God loves the whole planet. Yes, I know. That is a remarkable challenge. It's overwhelming. But as I regularly tell my students at Eden Seminary, I'd much rather be overwhelmed than bored. And I promise you friends, if you just begin to try to contemplate what it means to love the whole planet, you'll never be bored again. And yes, I know, no one of us can do everything for our planet and for its people that needs to be done, or even that we would like to do. So I'm going to leave you with the words of what has become known as the Romero Prayer, even though it's more like a brief homily than a prayer, and even though it wasn't written by Oscar Romero. It captures, anyway, the spirit of Oscar Romero. By the way, my stole is from El Salvador and it's on white for epiphany, but on the green side, which most of the year is green, this is a picture of Oscar Romero. Anyway, this prayer or homily captures the spirit of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who was assassinated in 1980 but who recently became a saint in the Roman Catholic church. Listen, it goes like this in part.

We accomplish in our lifetimes only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We cannot do everything. There is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and to do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders. Ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. So friends, so fellow prophets, let's get to work as 2019 gets underway. Let's do something, and let's do it very well. For God's sake, and I mean this literally, for the sake of the God who has the whole world in God's hands, let's do the very best that we can do to be big enough to love the whole planet. And to God be the glory. Amen.