

**NOW THE GREEN BLADE RISES**  
**BEING AN EASTER PEOPLE IN A GOOD FRIDAY WORLD**  
***A People of Life for All Creation***

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Janice C. Kemp

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**Revelation 7:9-17**

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

*And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,*

*"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."*

*Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'*

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.  
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

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Lately I have been digging in the dirt a lot, expanding some garden beds. Often, as my shovel slices into the ground and turns over the soil, I find it also has sliced through an earthworm, now two wriggling parts of what formerly was one whole. Perhaps that's why my mind has been playing and replaying a scene from a movie I saw about fifteen years ago. It is just a brief moment in the movie, *Seven Years in Tibet*. Brad Pitt plays the mountain-climbing Heinrich Harrar, an Austrian who is part of a German team climbing a yet-unconquered mountain in the Himalayas in 1939. As they return to their base camp the team is captured by the British, who have just declared war on Germany. Heinrich later escapes a prison camp in India and finds his way back into Tibet. Over the next few years, a series of adventures leads him to the Holy City of Lhasa, where he becomes the unlikely friend and confidante of the Dalai Lama, just a boy at the time but already the recognized spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. The insatiably curious boy, wanting to learn all he can from this knowledgeable European, asks Heinrich to build a movie theater so that he might view his film collection.

The scene that so captivates me occurs one day early in construction as Heinrich finds the Tibetan laborers making excruciatingly slow progress digging the foundation for the theater. When a shovel slices through a worm, work ceases. The workers tenderly cradle the worm and beg Heinrich, "No more hurting worms." The incredulous Heinrich takes the problem to the Dalai Lama, who immediately understands what has happened. In wisdom that exceeds his years, he explains, "Tibetans believe all living creatures were their mothers in a past life. So we must show them respect and repay them for their kindness...and never, never harm anything that lives. You cannot ask a devout people to disregard a

precious teaching.” These people have so absorbed this “precious teaching” of their Buddhist faith that it is not just a rule they can follow or break. It is a teaching that has shaped their lives, their way of being in the world, their way of relating to all other life. It has become part of their consciousness. Aware of the value of all life, they cannot intentionally harm others.

Today, on this *Integrity of Creation* Sunday, I ask you as devout people of the Christian faith, “what precious teaching of *our* faith informs *our* lives, *our* way of living within creation, *our* way of relating to all other non-human life-forms? Such a teaching could shape *our* consciousness and thereby guide *our* choices as we live and do and be part of the web of life on this blue-jewel, third planet from the sun. It would guide *our own* reaction when *our* shovel slices through an earthworm.

It seems to me that most Western Christians live without awareness of such a faith-based, “precious teaching.” This would astonish the ancients in whose lives and stories our own faith is rooted. Their very survival as a predominantly agrarian people living on a marginally productive land depended on a deeply embedded consciousness of how to be in relationship with the land and all it fed. They had precious teachings on which this consciousness was based. And they passed those on to us. We can find them in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis.

Somehow, over the centuries, we lost the meaning of the teachings and our consciousness shifted. Since the first Earth Day 40 years ago, there has been a new and growing awareness that we are intricately interconnected with all of life and what we do matters greatly. Yet for many Christians, there is a disconnect between environmental consciousness and faith.

I believe that it is crucial that we reclaim the precious teachings of our religious heritage, beginning with the stories of creation in Genesis. There is a reason these stories are told at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible. They lay the foundation for the faith of the ancient Hebrew people. Their truth lies not in their historicity, as present-day creationists would argue, but in their mythic ability to convey who God is, who we are, and what it is that we are supposed to do during our lives on this planet. To reclaim these stories in their fullness we must wrest them from those who have distorted them beyond recognition by pitting them against science, making them all about sin and guilt, and using them to give *carte blanche* to do whatever we please.

The first of these stories depicts a Divine Source expressed in an ever-expanding, creative spirit that delights with each new possibility as it manifests in reality...light in the darkness, day and night, the separation of land from the waters and atmosphere from the earth, plant and animal life in all its ever-expanding diversity, and finally humans. All that exists is brought into being by this Source that, once on a roll, is so enthralled with what has materialized that it just has to do more. God simply can't stop creating. Each day God pauses to evaluate God's handiwork and finds the new creation to be “good.” Good not in a moral sense, but good in the sense of being intrinsically valuable. Good in the sense of being inherently beautiful...The simple elegance of a strand of DNA that, in its ability to code for protein production, provides the basis for all of the varied structures and processes of life...The beauty of its self-replicating ability to pass this code on to new cells and even new life that a single-celled embryo can become a whale and that there might be another generation of whales to follow this one...The amazing ability of a chlorophyll-bearing cell to capture light energy and store it in chemical bonds that can later be broken, thereby releasing the energy to make new and different molecules or to fuel the processes of life...The elegant complexity of the food web through which this energy is transmitted from one life to another as herbivores graze on grasses and predators eat herbivores, and parasites feed on us all ...The beautiful interrelatedness of life forms that creates the elegant, complex dance of life on this planet. Can't you just see the Divine Source moving through this emerging, burgeoning creation, speaking in awe and delight for the first time a prayer handed down to us by Native Americans:

*I walk in Beauty. Beauty before me. Beauty behind me. Beauty above me. Beauty below me. Beauty around me.*

And what about us? At last the first humans are created with a special gift. We are made in the Source's very image. The story leaves it to our imagination to decide what this means, but if we have any

resemblance to our Creator, then surely creative imagination must be part of it...and also delight and awe and wonder at the diverse beauty and intrinsic worth of this created world.

God's final evaluation of this work of creation is that God sees it not merely as good but as very, very good. Today we might say, AWESOME. The blessing that confers dominion to humans comes within the context of God's delight in all that God has created. How can we humans, in wearing the mantle of power conferred to us by our Source, use that power in ways that endanger the very creation that so delights the One who created it...and us?

This first story of creation tells us a *lot* about who God is. It tells us *something* about who we are. *Implicit* within it is a message about what we are supposed to do. But just in case this message is too subtle, the ancient Hebrews follow the first story with a second one that waxes more eloquently on this point. In this story, which begins in Genesis 2, God creates the heavens and the earth, but there is not yet any life. God would like to have a garden, but God knows there cannot *be* a garden without someone to care for it. And so God creates the gardener first. God takes some of the dust of the earth and forms a human being. The Hebrew words here reflect the intimate connection of humanity to the earth. The earth, in Hebrew, is *adamah*. The nongendered, generic term for a human being is *adam*. So the first *adam* is formed from the very *adamah* the *adam* is being created to tend. Only after the gardener has been created, does God create the garden.

Genesis 2:15 says God put the human being in the garden to till and keep it. Our translation does not convey the richness of the original Hebrew language. The Hebrew word *shamar*, translated here as "keep" also can be translated as guard, safeguard, take care of, or look after. It is a loving, caring, sustaining kind of keeping. The translation of the Hebrew word *abad* as "till" is unusual. This word, which occurs 290 times in the Hebrew Bible almost always is translated as "serve." For example, in Joshua 24:15: "Choose this day whom you will *abad* (serve)...As for me and my household, we will *abad* (serve) the Lord." And so the *adam* and all of *adams* descendants, including us, are here to serve the garden of life. We are earth-tenders, safekeepers of creation, gardeners created to serve God's precious garden.<sup>1</sup> These two powerful stories, whose richness we have only begun to uncover today, illuminated the consciousness of the Hebrew people. In their nonlinear, historic, and very human journey of growing awareness alternating with forgetfulness, God continued to come to them, through mythic story and lived experience:

- in the creation of a giant ark that saves humans and animals equally from a great flood that ends with a rainbow covenant;
- on a starlit night when another covenant is born as God promises Abraham descendants who always will be God's people;
- in a burning bush that changes Moses' life and the history of those people;
- in the parting of a sea and manifesting of manna during wilderness wanderings that lead to discovery of a promised land;
- in a prophetic, hope-filled promise of a new heaven and a new earth characterized by the harmony and abundance of the original blessing intended by Source in the beginning;
- in the life of one born among the animals in a place illuminated by another star;
  - who, while only a boy, astounded the learned elders with his knowledge and interpretation of his heritage;
  - who, after his consciousness-expanding, mystical experience of baptism, went into the wilderness to commune and gain strength to live and teach his own expanding consciousness of God;
  - who called fishermen to a different kind of fishing, broke bread to feed thousands, promised living water that would quench our true thirst, and taught love through words and action;
  - who knew from his own experience that the kingdom of heaven is available to us now, and taught us to pray that it might come into fullness in our experience;
  - who was so full of God that he could pray that we might also know the oneness he already experienced;
  - who, one last time, went into a garden for solace and prayer before his betrayal and death;

- who has been experienced since his death by people around the world throughout the centuries in confirmation that there is more life beyond physicality.

At last we are ready to hear, in the context of this epic journey of consciousness, the mystical vision of John, as reported in *Revelation*, the final book of the recorded precious teachings that begin with the Genesis stories. John's vision ends in the final realization of the promised new heaven and new earth...not a heaven beyond this world and an earth that is a different planet, but, as Eckhart Tolle suggests,<sup>ii</sup> a heaven that is a *new consciousness*, the *result* of which is manifestation, in *this physical world*, of a re-newed, harmonious, blessed creation through which the water of life flows abundantly. It is the kingdom that has always been at hand, as Jesus knew, and would manifest if our consciousness would only allow that.

In the part of the vision we read today, a great multitude has gathered--people from all nations, speaking all languages. They have been through incredibly difficult challenges, but their ordeal has not separated them from God. Rather it has brought them closer, creating an expanded awareness that results in their singing a great hymn of thanksgiving and praise. It is the same hymn we hear in the last chorus of Händel's great work, *Messiah*.

*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!*

We do not know all of the challenges, the ordeals that lie ahead of us...but we can glimpse the "tip of the rapidly-melting iceberg": global warming; desertification; species extinction; pollution of land, rivers, and seas. In the words of Paul, creation groans. There are many challenges for those who would serve and safeguard the garden of life. May our own consciousness be expanded to create a new heaven in our time, the bursting forth of the kingdom that already is at hand, the abundant flowing of the waters of life, the manifestation of the new earth bringing to fruition the intended original blessing. And may we join with all of creation--sun and moon, whales and walleye, mountains and oceans, mushrooms and meadow mice, swallowtails and, yes, even earthworms—all of us singing praise and thanksgiving in our own languages to the Source that created us and blesses us with continuing Presence:

*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our Creator, our God, forever and ever! Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> This interpretation of the Hebrew is from Calvin B. DeWitt, "Reading the Bible Through a Green Lens," *The Green Bible (NRSV)*, Harper Collins Publisher, 2008, p.1-29.

<sup>ii</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth:Awakening to Our Life's Purpose*, 2005.