

*If I Knew that Tomorrow Was the End of the World...*

Fifth Sunday of Easter / Earth Day Sunday

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Text: Revelation 21

So I first heard this quote from Martin Luther some time ago – not sure when or how, but I did – Martin Luther said: “If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today”. And when I heard that, and heard that it was said by Martin Luther (one of the great Protestant Reformation leaders of the 16<sup>th</sup> century), I thought: “Hmm – yes! – that’s profound.” Now if that strikes you as profound too – that’s good; if you’re not sure how it strikes you or what in the world it might mean at all, well, we’ll get to that too. But first I have to tell you that soon after I first heard that quote, naming Luther as the source was hedged a bit: ‘Martin Luther is *purported* to have said’ – well, so, Luther *may* have said it – that’s still something - I still think it’s profound. And I’ve actually passed on this quote, ascribed to Luther, to a fair amount of people over the years – “you know Luther supposedly said if the world were to end tomorrow, he’d plant a tree today” – I would say this in theologically appropriate circumstances...and people would nod and find it interesting too. But it turns out it doesn’t take much fact-checking effort for one to realize that Martin Luther almost completely certainly did NOT say this – since it isn’t found in any of Luther’s existing original writings...and was somehow in the early 1940s first ascribed to him...but ever since then people like me heard it and passed it on: “you know, I heard Martin Luther said...”

So now I find myself with a situation – I have a great quote, but no one to quote it from... So maybe the question becomes: *should* Martin Luther have said it?! Or perhaps better yet what I mean to ask is, if this quote is worthy of being seen as good theology at all? – something that we in the Protestant tradition, kin to Luther, would want to claim as our own? – something we would even want to ascribe to John Calvin instead, as long as we’re misquoting prominent theologians! ☺

“If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today.” So let me tell you why I think that this *is* such good theology – quoteworthy - if someone *had* actually said it. The idea it encapsulates is that it takes “the end of the world” which is usually a kind of code language for God’s final judgment of the peoples of the world – code for the stuff of heaven and hell and a lot of fire and destruction...it takes the “end of the world” and links it with this world and with now – with the stuff of what is present right here

and now. In the words of my quote with no source, it says that after the end of the world, that apple tree you planted will be a part of what's next. Theologically it says that "the end of the world" is not so much about destruction as it is about fulfillment – and that's the part that I find so intriguing and profound, and that I've had some people nod with me about over the years.

I think it's a quote we could wish for a good theologian to have said. So could we even say then that it is a *biblical* quote? Not a quote from the Bible – I don't want to start another misquote scenario in motion – but an idea that reflects what the Bible expresses? Such as in Revelation 21?

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away*

Revelation expresses an "end of the world" vision – a vision that through image and word speaks of the culmination of God's salvation history; and it is often a vision used theologically to speak about a lot of destruction and heaven/hell sort of judgment. But what about this image from Revelation which is a culmination of all that has happened in the Revelation drama?

*...a new heaven and a new earth...the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...*

Is this something that echoes the "if the world ends tomorrow - plant a tree today" idea? Well, it says there is 'a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, the first has passed away' ...so I'm afraid it seems like that apple tree is gone in this scenario. Except...what does that word "new" mean? – does it mean the first, the former, is destroyed, replaced, gone? That's sometimes what "new" means – perhaps often – or perhaps often what we make it mean in a culture where "new" is good and old is not so much. But let me explore another meaning of "new" with you – and just so you don't think I'm trying to play any biblical exegesis tricks on you as I do, all we have to do first is take a quick field trip to today's gospel lesson in John 13 to find something out about new.

In John 13 we hear Jesus talking with his disciples and he says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." But here's the thing – this is NOT a new commandment! To love others – love your neighbor as yourself – was central to the law given by God to Israel; the prescription to love others has for centuries been part of the Jewish covenant religion in which Jesus and these disciples abide. 'Love one another' is NOT a new commandment – so why does Jesus say it is a new commandment? It's because new can mean something other than 'brand new', something even other than starting over or replacing; new can also mean fulfilling, completing, renewing – it can mean reclaiming, restoring, redeemed. When Jesus speaks of a 'new commandment', what it means for us as followers of Jesus is that Christ reveals the full content of such love:

‘as I have loved you, love one another’. The commandment has not changed, but the life, death and resurrection of Christ (in John’s gospel past and present and future are all always mingled together) changes how we see love at work from God and in our lives and in our world. A new commandment – which contains the old, and fulfills it.

That’s the end of the field trip –so let’s go back to Revelation: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*

And now with what we’ve learned about “new” from John’s gospel, this vision from Revelation may be closer to bringing together the end of the world and our apple tree than it first appeared. You can start to hear ‘new heaven and a new earth’ not as something that is starting over, brand new, but something in continuity with what was before – and now fulfilled, renewed, redeemed. Which makes you realize that in fact is often what ‘new’ means both biblically and theologically. When the Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Corinth that ‘to be in Christ one is a new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come’ – it is not about someone being annihilated; it is about God taking who we are and redeeming into who we are created to be. And right here in Revelation a few verses later when we hear the very voice of God saying “See, I am making all things new” – it is not about God annihilating everything and starting over, it is about the miraculous creative Spirit of God that brings true life and fulfillment to all things – to all creatures and creation; it is a much more profound and creative and powerful and permanent kind of new that only God can do.

So – it was Earth Day on Friday, as I hope you noticed – this is Earth Day Sunday, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. And this theological reflection connecting a not-Luther quote about the end of the world and planting an apple tree & a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation, is really all to say this: as Christians one of our unfortunate legacies is a history much too insistent on separating the salvation God gives in Christ from this life and this world – a focus that is other-worldly and after-life-y. And one of the tragic legacies of that history is that such an understanding of salvation has often pushed Christians to be a part of devaluing and diminishing God’s creation rather than faith supporting the flourishing of this earth, here and now.

And so it seems important to say that as we do celebrate Earth Day, repenting for misuse of God’s gifts in creation and seeking to live in this world with gratitude and care, that to do so is not just a nice gesture or a pleasant afterthought – it is good theology! - it is biblical faith! I believe that the Spirit of God has been at work in

this generation outside the established church in order to call the church back to such earth care practices – but as that has happened, what we find as God turns us towards a renewed gratitude and urgency to steward creation is that the connection of salvation to creation is right there in the biblical witness; not only in the beauty of the Psalms and the witness of creation to God’s goodness and bounty, but also at the very heart of God’s salvation story: that what God redeems is not just us people, but all of creation: “I make all things new”. And even more, that the promise for this new (renewed) creation is not an otherworldly vision, but a fulfillment of THIS creation God has made – the stuff of this world.

Now I know that ministers like me can throw around the word “mystery” at convenient times when we have a hard time explaining things, but here goes: it is a mystery to me what all this means to speak of the end of the world and heaven and earth made new in a way that has a continuity with this very world and life we know now; but it is a mystery that I find incredibly heartening and inviting to explore. It really is a different sort of way of believing that we need to have settle into us for another day or week or year or millennia or two as Christians – and as we do so it will more and more see our lives and world participating in the redemption of God – to see how we treat one another and this world as part of the fulfillment God will accomplish.

I mean – I suppose if I were to make up a clever quote about it, I would say something like this: “If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today” – a way of linking together faithfulness today in God’s creation to God’s promise to make all things new. So, how about if we claim that quote as our own – Luther didn’t say it; but we will. In fact, on p.9 you’ll see an announcement that there is a tree-planting today – and it’s not just a nice Earth Day thing to do, it is an act of faith and a witness to the God who makes all things new – you can quote us on it. Thanks be to God. AMEN.