

Order of Service "Losing Paradise"

Sunday, January 3, 2009

9:30 AM and 11:00 AM

Welcome: Board Host
Prelude

Chalice Lighting
Opening Words
Opening Song: #360 "Here We Have Gathered"

Time for All Ages
Sung Response: "As You Go" by Kathleen Tracy

Reading: "New Year's Day" by Kathleen McTigue
Celebrating with Music
Sermon: "Losing Paradise"
Sung Response: #57 "All Beautiful March the Days"
Spoken Response

Candles of Joy and Sorrow/Offering
Prayer and Meditation

Closing Song: #44 "We Sing of Golden Mornings" (verse 1)
Closing Words
Closing Song: #44 (verse 2)

Celebrants: Lorene Hales and the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods
Special Musicians: Craig and Nancy Leman

Chalice Lighting: As we begin a New Year, we kindle a flame of promise that we may yet overcome our worst challenges and bring our dreams to fruition. If not now, when? Of not us, who?

Opening Words: #440 by Phillip Hewett

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within our selves.

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather.

In this spirit we pray.

Reading: #544 "New Year's Day" by Kathleen McTigue (SLT)

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms, with or without our calendars to name a certain day

as the day of new beginning, separating the old from the new.

So it is: everything is the same,

bound into its history as we ourselves are bound.

Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something

truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands:

what shall we do with this great gift of Time, this year?

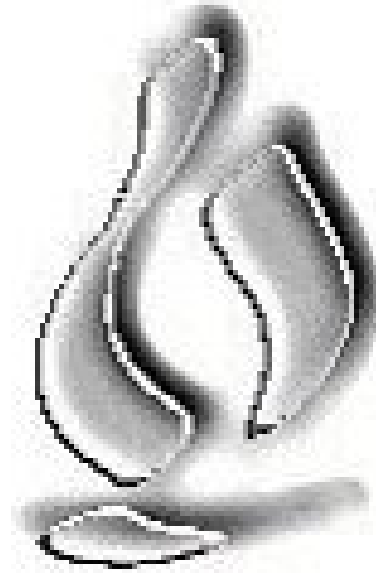
Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year,

we are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of all the best visions of our people.

The new year can be new ground for the seeds of our dreams.

Let us take the step forward together, onto new ground,

planting our dreams well, faithfully, and in joy.





Sermon “Losing Paradise” by the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

I wondered whether anyone would show up here on this Sunday morning to share an exploration of “paradise.” I suspect this idea has little meaning for those of us who do not believe in an afterlife anything like the traditional notions described in western civilization. I know some of us believe in different forms of reincarnation and some of us do not believe there is any afterlife at all. We die: end of story.

Still, I am also deeply disturbed by the power the notion of paradise has in our current culture. It was only a few years ago that the Secretary of the Interior of this country told us that we need not worry about the environment because the end times were upon us and he, for one, would be in paradise beyond this earth. That kind of thinking has had too much influence over the politics of western culture, to the detriment of the environment and peace as we would like to know it. Perhaps we should take a second look at this idea.

I would like to do that over the next few weeks, beginning today with a study of the origins of the idea, how it is understood in the three major religions of the west, and how the idea devolved to the detriment of all humanity. Here we go:

It is important to understand that Judaism, the first of the Big Three, had no notion of paradise until after the exile in Babylon, which began in 597 B.C.E. when the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar carried away the Jewish King, Jehoiakin, and ten thousand of its best and brightest citizens. In 586 B.C.E., another rebellion by the Jews led to the total destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the scattering of most of the remaining Jews to Babylon, Egypt, and surrounding safe havens. It was at this point that the historians ceased to call these people Hebrews and began to call them Judeans or Jews.¹

While in exile in Babylon, the Jews actually experienced relative freedom to follow their culture. They also learned about Zoroastrianism and over time adopted and adapted numbers of their ideas to Judaism, including dualism, end times, and the notions of heaven and hell.² Here is where we find the first expressions of a heaven or paradise in Judaism:

The older Jewish belief that the dead descend to a colorless existence in the pit of She'ol, a land of forgetfulness not unlike the Greek Hades and the Babylonian Aralu, was in part superseded by a belief in the resurrection of the body to an afterlife of full mental vigor and awareness.

. . . the expectation now was that the coming of God's agent of deliverance would be from the clouds of heaven at the end of the world.³

This was a large change from the older thinking of the Jewish prophets that there would be a Day of Judgment in which Jewish enemies would be destroyed and a new king of David's lineage would establish a new Jewish kingdom on this earth. The argument continues to this day whether or not there was, is, or will be such a Jewish Messiah.

Let us skip over Christianity for a moment to examine the Muslim concept of paradise. Muhammad spoke directly of paradise in his early suras:

When the sun shall be darkened,
when the stars shall be thrown down,
when the mountains shall be set moving,
when the pregnant camels shall be neglected,
when the savage beasts shall be mustered,
when the seas shall be set boiling,
when the souls shall be reunited,
when the buried infant shall be asked for what sin she was slain,
when the scrolls shall be unrolled,
when heaven shall be stripped off,
when Hell shall be set blazing,
when Paradise shall be brought nigh,
then shall a soul know what it has produced.⁴

¹ John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*. Pp. 378-389.

² Ibid. p. 390

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 502

You notice Muhammad does not mention virgins awaiting those who kill for Allah. Islam shows a great deal of Zoroastrian influence as well as Judaism, including the notion that Allah sits in the seventh heaven, served by angels who act as attendants and ministers.⁵ Here are a few more suras regarding paradise:

“...those who keep faith with God...shall have the recompense of Paradise. They shall enter the gardens of Eden together with the righteous among their fathers, their spouses, and their descendants. From every gate the angels will come in to them, saying: “Peace be to you for all that you have steadfastly endured. Blessed is the recompense of Paradise.” (Sura 13:24)□□□□

“The wrongdoers shall be sternly punished. As for those that have faith and do good works, they shall be admitted to gardens watered by running streams, in which, by their Lord’s leave, they shall abide for ever, Their greeting shall be: ‘Peace!’” (Sura 14:23)□

We can see how incorrect those are who claim that Muslims’ paradise is an invitation to war and terrorism.

In fact, it is clear from these suras that the Muslim paradise was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Christianity that preceded Islam. So let us now return to Christianity, to explore their ideas of paradise and how those ideas changed radically to give us a world of empire and war.

Here I turn to the marvelous research done by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book, *Saving Paradise*. After they wrote a ground-breaking critique of the theology of atonement (that Jesus died as reparation for all the sins of the world and that human beings should act with the same self-sacrificing love), they decided to find out where that whole idea began. That led to a shock: the first millennium of Christianity had no such notion. Rather, Jesus is seen as leading people to create a paradise here on this good earth. As they note:

We found no crucifixions in any of Ravenna’s early churches. The death of Jesus, it seemed, was not a key to meaning, not an image of devotion, not a ritual symbol of faith for the Christians who worshipped among the churches’ glittering mosaics. The Christ they saw was the incarnate, risen Christ, the child of baptism, the healer of the sick, the teacher of his friends, the one who defeated death and transfigured the world with the Spirit of Life.⁶

In fact, they found no crucifixes in all of the earliest Christian churches, not in Italy, not in Istanbul, not in northeastern Turkey. As they note, “We failed to find even one dead Jesus.”⁷

They did not find a dead Jesus on a cross until they came across the Gero Crucifix in Saxony. What they did find were endless depictions of Paradise as a place accessible on earth. This paradise, like that of later Muslims, featured flowing rivers. It was a place of rich orchards and gardens, of birds and animals living in peace, and of the greatest human inspirations known to the people at the time. As they put it, “. . . in the early church, paradise – first and foremost – was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on earth.”⁸

What happened?? Back to Saxony: As I said, the first crucifix our authors found is the Gero Cross, found in the Cologne Cathedral in Germany. The crucifix was carved from oak around 960-970 A.C.E. On this cross, Jesus hangs, already dead and distended by his crucifixion.

What was the source of this violent and despairing image? Brock and Parker traced the oppression of the Saxons by the followers of Charlemagne back to the late 8th century and early 9th century. Influenced by a monk named Columbanus (late 6th century) who believed that human beings were sinners that needed to accept Jesus as their savior in order to find peace in the afterlife, the Carolingians repeatedly forced Saxons to convert from their worldly Christianity that favored this world to an other-worldly, future-oriented form of Christianity:

The Saxon frontier became a battleground between their more ancient forms of Christianity and Carolingian Christianity. The Carolingians fused church and state in new ways, altered the long-standing Christian prohibition against shedding human blood, and made Christianity a colonizing tool.⁹

The Saxons kept fighting back and, once finally converted after centuries of bloody fighting, both in battle and in culture, they came to identify *with* the crucified Jesus. Thus began the process of identifying Jesus’ death with promises of life after death rather than paradise on this earth. And those who were overwhelmed by the “convert or die” approach to Christianity came to have a love/hate relationship with it. “The Carolingians constructed a Christian piety that used violence to convert pagans and then taught its victims to regard their violation as justified and sanctified.”¹⁰ Theology became a weapon of violence and oppression.

In November of 1095, Pope Urban called a Peace Council in Clermont, France at which he declared peace among Christians, responding to the lawlessness that followed the fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire, and then

⁵ Ibid. p. 508.

⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. p. xi.

⁷ Ibid. p. x

⁸ Ibid. p. xv.

⁹ Ibid. p.233

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 238.

called for the first Crusade against “the bastard Turks.” He ended the ban against shedding blood of any human being, even by soldiers, so that Christians could fight the Muslims – and thus bring peace amongst themselves. Paradise became more and more distant, leaving earth and moving into some afterlife, which was most easily attained by those who engaged in war.¹¹

How far from the original paradise or Christianity had perspective fallen? Brock and Parker offer this image:

. . . The church in western Europe had once been in love with the risen Christ, who joined his bride in the earthly garden of delight and helped her tend it. Beginning in the ninth century, she began to doubt her lover and took a violent Lord into her bed, lay with him, blessed him, and finally, took him into the Christian family by marrying him. Erotically enthralled by her seductive abuser, the church spawned devotional, pieties of fear, sorrow, torture, and death, whose progeny journeyed into the world determined to destroy their own shadows and neighbors. To solidify this unholy union, the church sacrificed her former love by killing him repeatedly and partaking of his mutilated body. She told herself that conquest, genocide, and the colonization of Jerusalem were God’s will, a holy pilgrimage that would someday, if she sacrificed and suffered enough, deliver salvation, end the violence, and restore her to her first love. This delusional pattern would later carry conquistadors and pilgrims to the Americas and leave Jerusalem as one of the most contested cities on the planet. To assuage her broken heart and bleeding body, she told herself that such a marriage was good and pleasing to God. She hung, suspended in eschatological terror and hope, longing elusively for release, relief, and love’s fulfillment. They did not come.¹²

Dramatic and traumatic as this poetic depiction is, I do not find it untrue. Paradise was lost, but not until almost a millennium after Jesus died. Now, in the third millennium, we see the fruits of the loss in most of the Middle East, especially Gaza and east Jerusalem, and, for that matter, around our world.

Next week, we shall explore whether it is possible to save any notion of paradise on this planet, and why we might even want to do so. Tune in - with respect, responsibility, and relish for this process.

So Be It! Blessed Be!



¹¹ Ibid. pp. 262-263.

¹² Ibid. pp.305-306.