



[Luke 21:45-53](#)

One of the things that I love about living here is the amount of sky that we can see. And I know that many of us find the beauty of a sunset to be a place and a time when we are moved beyond ourselves and experience God.

The Apostles Creed tells us that “Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” Scholars suggest that this creed originated in the second century or perhaps the 5th century though it didn’t appear in the form we know it until 710. Whether this phrase “Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father” appeared in the 2nd, 5th or 8th century I don’t know, but clearly it reflects earlier understandings of God.

I wonder whether we can re-imagine the ascension with today’s understanding of the universe and think that perhaps when Jesus disappeared from view he wasn’t translated to a different place called “heaven” but became one with the sky, just as in his birth and death he had become one with the earth. Perhaps in his ascension he joined first with the atmosphere of this planet and then with outer space and the whole cosmos. Perhaps in his ascension he embodied the Cosmic Christ in a new way.

The scriptures tell us that the Christ was there at the very beginning – that nothing was made without him- and that the Christ will be there at the end of the ages when on the Judgment Day all things are brought into balance. Even though he was there at the very beginning, the Christ incarnated in Jesus, and became matter in a whole different way. Perhaps in his ascension he expanded that embodiment and became part of the matter of the air we breathe, the vast expanses of intergalactic space and the galaxies, planets, stars. Christ became the sky just as he had become the earth.

In recent decades we have reconnected with the creation spirituality of the first 1400 years of Christianity. We have rediscovered the idea that we can read God in the book of Creation just as we can read God in the book of the Bible. We have once again realized that we have been given stewardship of the planet which God loved so much that he became human, an integral part of it. Perhaps we have also been given stewardship of the sky into which Jesus the Christ ascended.

The sky is changing. The greenhouse gases which have been produced by human activity and released into the atmosphere are increasing the temperature of the planet. This is because these gases absorb energy and then radiate it outwards. This has the effect of heating up the surface of the planet. There are several greenhouse gases but carbon dioxide and methane are the two most significant. Earth has always had natural cycles of warming and cooling but not like we're seeing now. The four hottest years on record are 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017. The last below normal temperature year was 1965.

Before the 18th century, when humans in the industrial west began to burn coal, oil and gas, our atmosphere typically contained about 280 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Those are the conditions to which life on earth is adapted.

Now, as the use of fossil fuels spreads through the world, the amount of carbon in the atmosphere is skyrocketing — we now have well over 400 parts per million carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. At the same time, the rapid growth in demand for animal-based agriculture has seen other greenhouse gasses like methane and nitrous oxide rapidly rise. Agriculture causes about 15% of global emissions.

Amazingly, scientists have known about the effect of carbon dioxide on the atmosphere since the 1890s and yet we have not taken the threat seriously.

You don't need me to remind you about the effects of the increase in carbon dioxide — an increase in extreme heat, fire and droughts which cause crop failures; ocean acidification as the ocean absorbs carbon dioxide and gets warmer leading to coral bleaching, ice melting, less fish, rising water levels and consequent flooding of coastal areas; more extreme storms; and the loss of habitat for creatures and humans.

So what do we need to do to take care of the sky? Reduce our carbon and methane emissions. It's that simple and that hard. Taking care of the sky means taking care of ourselves and our neighbor.

It was, I sometimes think, easier in Jesus' day. When someone asked him who his neighbor was, he told a story about the Good Samaritan — a despised person who showed compassion and took risks that even the most religious Jews would not take to care for one who was injured. Today "our neighbor" is much more extensive. Today our neighbor is not just the guy panhandling outside Ralphs or the woman

living in her car outside the community center; our neighbor also lives on the other side of the planet. Our neighbor is starving in Yemen, fleeing for his life from Myanmar, and trying to find a new home for her kids by getting them into the United States. Our neighbor is suffering from drought, or sheltering from flood or digging through the rubble of a mudslide hoping against hope to find survivors.

Every time we put more carbon or more methane into the atmosphere we are harming ourselves and our neighbors. But I drove here in a car which uses gas and which emits carbon dioxide. I'm guessing that you did too. Most of us eat meat or cheese which both contribute methane.

Reducing the carbon and methane we put in the air is no longer optional. It has become an imperative of our faith. The second great commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. That means caring about the quality of the air we breathe and the quality of the atmosphere. If we are to get carbon emissions down to below 350 parts per million which is considered to be manageable, we have to keep carbon in the ground. This is why Earthcare and the Parish Council are supporting Measure G, which would prevent fracking and more oil drilling in this county. One small county taking a stand is probably not very significant in the big picture but as more and more counties do so then it adds up.

That is true of all our behaviors. What you do as an individual may seem insignificant, but it adds up.

If when Jesus the Christ ascended, he didn't go to another place called heaven and sit on a literal throne then it makes a difference to the way we think about what's happening. God is not out there somewhere, sitting on a cloud or on a distant planet; God is with us here and now. Christ fills all things with his living presence. God intervenes in history through the energy and actions of people of faith. God is not going to swoop down from the sky and sort out this environmental crisis.

But at the same time, God **is** here with us – not watching us from a distance. God is always working with us to bring about the best possible outcome. The anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We might add God into that, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,

committed citizens inspired by the Holy Spirit can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

God is with us as we love our neighbor by changing our own lifestyles and by taking our place in the public square, arguing for policies that will bless and enhance the flourishing of all life.

There is one other thing that we can do. Support education for girls and women. One of the ways we can care for the sky is through education - the education of women and children in particular reduces global warming. Educated women tend to have smaller families, and less people means less demand for oil, coal, gas, meat and cheese. Also, it is most often the women who have the greatest impact on the way a household lives. So in your charitable giving plan, please consider giving to support education of women and girls.

God created the earth and sky, and all the heavens. God is present in creation, always working for good. It is up to us to covenant with God, the heavens and the earth, that we will love our neighbor as ourselves and work for the common good.