

SAVING PARADISE

by Janet Ashear, October 4, 2009

In 2007, several Sheridan UUs attended the Mountain Desert District Annual Meeting in Billings, where we heard a presentation called *Saving Paradise*. I left wanting to know more, so I ordered the book when it was published in 2008. My presentation today is based on the book and attempts to provide a thumbnail sketch of the authors' main points, as if it is possible to do a 20-minute summary of a thoughtful, scholarly 552-page book that took five years to research. My apologies in advance for this oversimplification of a fascinating topic, and to the members of the fellowship who have had the pleasure of hearing Rebecca Ann Parker speak.

Saving Paradise is the latest of several books co-authored by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. Rita Nakashima Brock is the Minister of the Disciples of Christ Church in Oakland, and Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good. Rebecca Ann Parker is President and professor of theology at Starr King School for the Ministry, one of two UU seminaries in the US.

The authors begin their book by noting one peculiar fact about early Christianity: for the first thousand years there were no depictions of the dead Jesus. In fact, Paradise was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries, but it was not the Paradise of an afterlife. This was an earthly Paradise, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. The earliest image of this beautiful garden dates to a 4th century apse of an important basilica in Rome. The two authors had to sneak behind a large 17th century tryptich depicting the crucifixion to see the apse. The mosaic portrays Jesus at the moment of Transfiguration (when his divine nature is revealed to Peter, James and John). He stands beneath a starry sky, surrounded by a sunlit meadow with flowing streams full of fish, trees heavy with fruits and nuts, animals, birds and flowers. (See the book jacket for another beautiful example from the 6th century.)

Contrast this to the central worship figure in a German cathedral, carved of oak in 960 CE: it is the life-size figure of a dead Jesus hanging on the cross. The authors describe the grotesque detail of this image and pose the questions: "What happened to Christianity? What happened to Paradise? Why did it take Jesus a thousand years to die? And finally, what happened to humanity in the 400 years that separated these two images? And so began the search that took the authors throughout the Middle East and Europe following the trail left by art historians from the ruins of early churches in remote villages to the grandest gothic cathedrals. To round out their quest, they trace the historical consequences of Christianity's shift in focus from Paradise to an atonement theology and follow the results through the second thousand years of Western Christian history to the present day. Throughout the book, the authors bring us

back to the central issue of Paradise. How does our definition of Paradise shape our expectations and longing for what it has to offer, and how does it affect our real world behavior toward the environment and each other?

The earliest reference to Paradise is found in Sumerian texts dating back 4,000 years. Paradise was located in Mesopotamia (literally, "between the four rivers"), and described an idyllic place where the goodness and pleasure of everyday life were enjoyed. Sumerian leadership did have their act together. They constructed walled cities with fine public architecture and gardens and held in community trust the resources necessary for survival (water, fields, orchards, flocks and herds). They developed one of the world's first written languages in order to record and inventory these resources and determine how to distribute them equitably. Their stories and art celebrated the goodness of ordinary life, depicted as activities of Paradise. These stories established the way the world was at its best. Sumerians also liked to contrast the goodness of Paradise with their stories of disaster, war, and death. These myths survived the decline of the Sumerian culture itself and were retold in the story of Genesis (ca. 1600 BCE).

The word Paradise came from the Greek and Persian languages, describing a garden surrounded by a wall. Persian kings built walled gardens with trees, streams, gardens, even game animals. In Genesis 1, humanity was given the responsibility to act ethically and make life flourish so that joy and beauty might bless the world. The Genesis imperative to have dominion over all the plants and animals is thought to arise from the now-outdated perspective that human life required a safe, protected place for habitation in the wilderness. Hold on to this image of a garden or city built within a walled space. This compartmentalization is a persistent image throughout the history we'll cover, up to the present day. The authors note its effect on how we relate to others and to our environment.

Like the Sumerian stories, Genesis continues with stories of things going wrong. Genesis 2 describes Eden as a garden of delight, but also suggests that Paradise had its limits and that acquiring knowledge carried risks. Humanity failed the requirements of life in Paradise, disaster followed, but somewhere in the distance, Paradise remained. Prophetic texts instructed that the gifts of Paradise would be restored when humanity established justice and accepted moral responsibility.

In the centuries leading to Jesus' birth, Paradise continued to be described as earthly life at its best. It was an aspect of life itself, not a permanent state of being. As in Sumeria, humanity flourished in this sense of Paradise when the community took responsibility for the well-being of all and respected and protected the processes that sustain human life. In Galilee, the legacy of Paradise would fuel a movement of resistance led by a rabbi named Jesus.

By Jesus' time, **ethical grace** was a concept that carried two elements within it: the grace of the core goodness of life on earth, and humanity's responsibility for sustaining (and sharing) it. Jesus' parable of the loaves and fishes is a prime example of this concept. It is described six times in the four Gospels. Humanity's task was to be the earthly manifestations of God. When we did this, we created Paradise.

The 4th and 5th centuries following Jesus' death were some of the most transformative in Christian history. Literature about Paradise proliferated. Although Paradise encompassed many dimensions, individuals were most fully in Paradise in community worship. Life in Paradise was a shared experience that provided sustaining life for all members together. Building members of a community was not a casual process. It required a process of cultivating one's perception and knowledge through lifelong training and spiritual practices in order to develop ethical discernment about good and evil. By study and experience, each person would come to see the value of his/her own life and learn that their actions mattered. As they learned to negotiate within a supportive community, their power, talents and gifts could be used and their burdens shared. A society of ethical grace measured itself by the wellbeing of its most vulnerable members, by its enhancements of human sociability and love, and by the creation of sustainable and decent life for all.

The portal to Paradise was baptism, which was another elaborate process which required months of education, austerity, and self-discipline as an applicant began the process of transforming his/her life into a fully contributing member of the religious community. This was a time of arduous intellectual and physical discipline, austerities, abstinences, and an active process of emotional and psychological scrutiny and healing support from the group. The culminating ceremony, begun during the night leading up to Easter morning, was a carefully orchestrated ritual designed to stimulate the senses, emotions and intellect to an open, joyful experience of the world. The result was an awareness of a divine presence infusing physical life in the community that welcomed them.

In this early Christian culture, beauty was placed at the heart of the cosmos. Early Christian leaders understood that care with images was important in ritual space, believing that art had the power to influence and inform. Just as beauty has the power to open the senses and the heart, violence hardens, numbs, and hurts people. According to the authors, it was in this spirit that the early church avoided focus on the crucifixion in its art and in the Eucharist ritual. Religious communities recited the stories of lamentation once each year, and filled their churches the rest of the year with images of the life of ethical grace.

In these communities, ethics, knowledge and responsibility flowed upward. The highest leadership had the greatest responsibility to live the ideals of the community and help others achieve their ideals. Serious sins resulted in a seven-year penance which

included excommunication from the church, isolation, and the practice of many austerities and compensations. Even "just wars" (in self-defense) required healing. As late as 1066 (the Norman invasion of England), warriors went to monasteries to do penance for killing.

By the 9th century, many changes were underway. Charlemagne led the Franks in 30 years of warfare to subdue and convert the Saxons (in what is now Germany). The Saxons had adopted their own version of Christianity in Roman times. Their Christianity was mixed with their ancient worship of holy trees, sacred springs and other sites in the natural world. Part of the campaign to purify this Saxon Christianity was to destroy their sacred natural places, loot, burn, slaughter. It was the most brutal period in Christian missionary efforts in Europe. On one particular day, 4500 Saxons were gathered up and beheaded. According to Charlemagne's bishops, a soldier who killed didn't have to do penance because he fought with Christ's support and assistance (although this was still the minority view of priests for the next 200 years). This cut the connection between great power and great responsibility. This war also marked the beginning of the fusion of church and state, the alteration of prohibition against shedding blood, and made Christianity a colonizing tool.

Charlemagne's troops prepared for battle by confessing their sins and partaking of the Eucharist. This was done on the battlefield under the Cross of the Resurrection, which became a symbol the Saxons learned to fear and despise. Saxons were taught by the occupying Christians that their lack of belief was the source of their suffering, and that Franks were justified in their violence against them. This explanation blurred the ethical distinction of who was the victim of the violence and who was the perpetrator. They were told by their occupiers that it was Christian for the Saxons to suffer and die, like Christ. As a hidden symbol of resistance, an unknown artist carved a life-size Jesus, dead on the cross, to portray the Saxon's experience at the hands of the oppressor.

By the 11th century, the crucified Christ was a common object of worship. Jesus entered a state of perpetual dying that would haunt Western European imagination and change civilization's understanding of human nature. To be human, now, was to suffer and die. Christians gave up the idea that Christ's incarnation revealed humanity's likeness to God, and restored humanity's divine power as it was first given in Paradise. Jesus, as an abused, innocent victim, hanging dead on the cross, would become the image of holiness. The art of Northern Europe filled with images of saints being tortured and final judgment scenes where the damned are flung into hell and the saved are dispatched to a walled city. Contrast this to the 4th century, when Christians mourned the crucifixion one day a year, celebrated Jesus' resurrection daily, and filled their public spaces with images of a shared Paradise.

Europe was fragmenting into feudalism, with warring regions run by lords of large estates. With no effective system of law, the land filled with marauding gangs. Priests

and clerics retreated, protecting themselves and what was left of Paradise behind the walls of monasteries and convents. This excluded the ordinary laity, who were promised a celestial Paradise far away, after their physical death and final judgment.

Pope Gregory proclaimed that soldiers could gain everlasting life by giving up arms or using arms in the service of the church (imitating Christ who laid down his life for others). There was an increasing emphasis on the crucifixion and the dread of the apocalyptic last judgment. People were told that they needed to experience Christ's suffering to be saved. They were promised a celestial Paradise, far away, after their physical death and the final judgment. Pilgrimages became popular to see places of Jesus' suffering. If they couldn't travel, they could contemplate the art of suffering and torture. Self-mutilation, self-flagellation, rejection of all creature comforts—all this in imitation of Christ's suffering—would allow the penitent to escape torment in the afterlife and gain Paradise.

By the end of the 11th century, Pope Urban II called for Peace by the Blood of the Cross (the First Crusade). By taking up arms against the Turks a soldier could substitute his service in exchange for all penance of sin. War was no longer a sin, but a means to atone for sin. Ranks of the Crusaders swelled to 100,000 (men, women, children) and traveled to the Rhineland to attack Jews, killing 10,000 (a third of the Jewish population in Europe). Symbols of the Apocalypse were increasingly used to interpret contemporary times. Jerusalem represented the apocalyptic promise of a new heaven and earth for Crusaders.

The Crusades transformed Europe. To raise money for the campaigns forests were felled. Pillaged riches of the Holy Land flowed back, allowing the development of a monetary economy, the rise of the middle class and professional guilds, and the construction of the great Gothic cathedrals. Bishops and clerics learned that the relics of cloth or bones of saints brought back from the Crusades would draw a crowd and reliquaries became popular destinations for the pious.

In 1231, Pope Gregory IX launched the inquisition. Now the church was licensed to use torture to discipline heretics and protect the faith. To make matters worse, by the 15th century the Plague arrived from China, accompanied by other diseases, famine, war and climate change. Over the next 100 years, half the population would die. The result was a meltdown of Europe's ecological, social, political, financial and religious systems. The church's only spiritual recourse was to preach to the populace that intense suffering made them holy. The faithful believed the world was ending, and that God would send down divine destruction of this world before the birth of a new world. There was little to distinguish divine power from evil—it was beyond human comprehension or hope. There seemed to be no power that transcended human agency in the world. Most of the religiously devout could explain what was happening

only in terms of human sin. Some wandered the streets flagellating themselves and each other.

From this culture of despair and chaos arose a number of escape legends, stepping up a search for Paradise that would shape the future of the New World.

1. Kingdom of Prester John: Stories of a distant paradise on earth with rich, vast lands watered by rivers and filled with blessings of paradise. Map makers included Prester John's Kingdom on maps through the 15th century.

2. Terra Parias (paradise on earth): There was a new world somewhere on earth just waiting to be plundered because there was no hope of entering paradise in this life and the end of the world was coming soon. Some map makers drew an island near China, illustrating it with a naked man and woman and a snake wrapped around a tree. In some cases the island was labeled Paradise; all cartographers labeled the spot "forbidden." Many medieval map makers oriented their maps with east (the direction of Paradise) at the top.

Christopher Columbus expected the universal conversion of Armageddon and the New Jerusalem to occur around 1650. He sailed in 1492 and established his first settlement in Hispaniola, an island he described as the closest thing to Paradise he could imagine. He built a colony, took some slaves, set up work camps and slaughtered children, old men and women. Within 20 years, fewer than 30,000 of the original one million inhabitants had survived the occupiers and the diseases they carried with them. They repopulated the labor force with slaves from Africa. In 1502, an observer wrote that what most puzzled the natives was not the Spaniards' violence, greed, or peculiar attitudes toward property, but rather their coldness, their hardness, and their lack of love.

On maps the location of Paradise shifted from Iraq/India to the New World, and then disappeared entirely by the mid 16th century. America was on the map, complete with pictures of slaves and of Europeans shooting natives.

3. Sola Scriptura (scripture alone) The Protestant Reformation was an iconoclastic reaction to the excesses and inaccessibility of the Catholic Church. Cathedrals were stormed and crucifixes and other images were destroyed. Reformers believed that text alone contained innocent, uncorrupted word which was written before the fall of church and society. They believed paradise was still in this world, in Mesopotamia, near present-day Iraq. Although sin had closed it, its original location could still be determined. The Bible and Lord's Supper were divine means of grace. This was the beginning of fencing the table: strangers ought not to be admitted. Perfection is unattainable until the day of resurrection.

The English Reformation opposed the Catholic Church and the monarchy, all regarded as agents of hell. The Puritans felt betrayed when Cromwell's reforms were not realized after the war, and interpreted it as a sign that the millennial reign of Christ was near at hand. The mid 17th century was filled with literature about Paradise. There was speculation about the original language of Paradise and a longing for the original pristine innocence of Eden. This sentiment and the disappointment in the failure of Cromwell enticed English Puritans and radical reformers to create a New World in America. Twenty thousand Puritans crossed the Atlantic from 1620 to 1640 on a mission to raise Eden in the Wilderness. North America was regarded as virginal land. To the Puritans the New World was seen as empty of any "real" inhabitants. When Native American tribes were decimated by disease, the epidemic was viewed as a generous act of God to prepare a place for the Puritans and a justification of their plan for expansion. It was part of their contest against evil, a purification and pathway to the apocalyptic recovery of Paradise. Even today, we continue the Puritan habit of dividing life in search of the ultimate separation of the pristine from the corrupt, wild from civilized.

Nineteenth and 20th century Christian reformers forged social efforts toward that pushed for conservation, women's suffrage, the New Deal, and Civil Rights. Although they weren't successful at connecting the struggles together, they shaped society through their efforts to dwell rightly in Paradise here and now. There was a love of nature and the longing to return to the pristine Eden that the legacy of colonization had destroyed.

Thoreau searched for wilderness, nostalgic for things his culture had disregarded. The American protestant lineage looked for paradise as a lost primordial wilderness or longed for a world that would transcend this one. Emerson created a spiritual structure for the individual soul to roam in an interior, immaterial natural space. The authors note that Emerson's Paradise could be established anew in the transcendental world through the inner life of human beings, but not in community. In fact, Emerson and Thoreau were both invited to Brook Farm (one of more than 100 Utopian efforts underway at the time) but each was too allergic to society to join even a Utopian one.

The authors describe the social ethics work of several notable Universalists, among others, including Jane Leade, John Murray and his wife Judith Sergeant Murray, Hosea Ballou, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, and Clarence Skinner. Skinner, in his 1915 book, *Social Implications of Universalism*, described Universalism as "that optimistic, life affirming religion that recognizes those who have faith in the world are the ones upon whom rests the tremendous responsibility of redeeming the world."

Other social gospels, such as that of Baptist preacher Walter Rauschenbush, taught that God is the ground of social unity. God doesn't belong to one group or nation, and full moral obligation doesn't stop at religious boundary.

Finally, in the late 20th century, there emerges the social gospel theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. To live rightly with one another on earth is not Utopia, but it is a profound embrace of this world that begins with love.

In their final pages these two authors speak eloquently of the nature of beloved community or ethical grace, and what it offers to a world teetering on the brink of environmental, social and spiritual catastrophe. How do we find the courage to deal with the reality that confronts us without flinching, shutting down, or indulging in the short-term fix of mindless consumerism? Even retreating into a private solitude is temporary, and insufficient. They describe the sacred work of religious community as a means of keeping our feet firmly planted in the present reality without indulging in nostalgia for the past or hope (without works) for the future.

Held in the embrace of a community's rituals and traditions, grief can find its depth, anger can voice its anguish, and protest can fuel creative action that holds out the possibilities of restored and protected life...

Life in paradise does not mean that conflict or despair or injustice are eliminated. It means that being present, fully feeling, and passionately engaged is possible and that the struggle for life can be sustained. The challenge for those who are committed to life here and now is to keep the human heart open....

Emotional attentiveness is more possible when people ground their life in something more than outrage alone: in a deep affirmation of life's goodness, in epiphanies of life's beauty and the possibilities of grace. It is the embrace of life—the knowing of paradise in this life—that makes protest possible. One weeps because one has known beauty and love. The apprehension of paradise now provides a foundation for emotional aliveness and moral clarity—it fuels outrage, protest, and social critique. At the same time, it provides a basis for sustained activism in its acknowledgment of beauty and joy.