

"NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH"
Revelation 21:1-27
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York Center Church of the Brethren
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Who is still afraid of the book of Revelation? Many of us have spent our lives in fear of this book because it has been so badly misinterpreted and misused. Here is what you need to remember about the Revelation of John. **It is not about the end of the world. It is about the end of evil. It is not a threat- it is a promise**—from the God who loves us.

Revelation was written as a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor by their pastor, John, who was living in exile on the island of Patmos. He was sent there by the Roman Empire because he refused to stop speaking the word of God about the Risen Christ. In those days the only one you were allowed to call "lord and god" was the Roman Emperor. In his absence, John was hearing that the people in the young congregations in his care were beginning to yield to the pressure from Rome. They were slowly sliding into accommodation with the culture around them. So he wrote to encourage their faith in the Risen Christ and to warn them of the dangers of compromising their beliefs.

In his book, *REVERSED THUNDER*, Eugene Peterson reminds us, "*John was pastor to a praying people who were engaged in the hard task of discerning the action of God in the seductively fraudulent commerce of their cities, picking the word of God out of the blasphemous words of politics and religion that daily bruised their ears.*" (1)

Pastor John couldn't be with these Christians he loved so he wrote them a letter they would never forget. Written to be read aloud within the faith community at worship it is filled with spectacular visions and outrageous characters. These images that are bizarre to us, would have been familiar to his listeners from their study of the Hebrew Scriptures. He wrote with such vivid and wild imagination because he wanted to catch their attention. He wanted them to look at themselves and their world with new eyes. He strove to unveil the Roman Empire for what it was- the embodiment of evil, injustice, violence, oppression, and lies.

John is not concerned about predicting the future- he is concerned about the present. He is concerned about helping his churches to remain faithful to God in the midst of the temptations of the Empire. Christians were a minority. Though

most were not at risk of dying for professing their faith, they were in danger of watering down their faith in God as they acquiesced to the demands of the Empire. Some simply abandoned their faith in favor of social acceptance and economic prosperity. Some found that it was just easier to go along with the demands of the Empire than to remain faithful to God.

The book of Revelation barely made it into the canon of scripture. Sometimes I wish it hadn't. Much damage has been done by those who claim it is a code to be broken so we can pinpoint the exact date and time that God will destroy the earth. That is a very odd and dangerous interpretation of a letter written to offer comfort and hope to vulnerable and suffering Christians. John didn't write this letter to frighten his churches but to urge them to remain steadfast in their faith and to assure them that despite all evidence to the contrary, God was still in charge. He wanted them to remember that the Roman Empire did not have absolute power and authority. Only God has absolute power and authority.

Because Revelation is the last book of the Bible we assume it is about an ending. It is, in fact, about a beginning. In the Revelation there is no "rapture," no snatching up of Christians from the earth. In John's vision, heaven actually comes down to earth. The culmination of history is when God moves into our neighborhood. Heaven is no longer "out there somewhere," it is right here, right now. It is immediate. We have seen bits and pieces of heaven on earth throughout history. As poet Robert Browning wrote, "Earth is crammed with heaven." But John finally shows us what it looks like in its fullness when God reclaims everything and renews it. The Genesis creation story tells us that God looked at all that had been created and said it was good. In John's vision God doesn't destroy everything that had been made. God does not make **all new things**. God makes **all things new**.

Do you see the difference? God does not junk the cosmos and start over- God renews what is already here and brings it to fulfillment. The incorrect understanding that the old world will be destroyed is what leads some Christians to claim that climate change and the way we treat God's precious creation doesn't matter- because, they believe, God will trash everything and start over again. But that isn't what John shows us. He shows us that care for God's creation **does** matter. He shows us that God values this creation and renews it, reclaims it, brings it to fulfillment.

In a book full of surprises, the big surprise for me is that heaven comes to earth as a city. That is certainly not my idea of heaven- but apparently it is God's idea.

Eugene Peterson writes, *"Heaven is formed out of dirty streets and murderous alleys, adulterous bedrooms and corrupt courts, hypocritical synagogues and commercialized churches, thieving tax collectors and traitorous disciples: a city, but now a holy city. And not only a city but the city of Jerusalem- a cramped, thousand-year old city, quite without splendor. True, there had been moments of great worship, great preaching, great temple-building, and great revelation here, but this was also the city that King David captured from the pagan Jebusites and then dishonored with adultery and murder. This was the city that became famous for its child sacrifices and unlawful sorceries. This was the city that mocked the saintly integrity of the prophet Jeremiah and turned a deaf ear to the powerful preaching of Isaiah. This was the city twice destroyed in judgment, first by the God-directed armies of Babylon, later by the Christ- prophesied Roman soldiers. When Jesus came to the city he wept. This is about the most unlikely city to serve as a model for heaven. Yet here it is. (2) Transformed, renewed, filled with beauty, life, and promise.*

John shows us three striking features of heaven- it is symmetrical, it is light-filled, and it is life producing. The shape is important because it is perfectly proportioned. John devotes a couple of verses to the specific measurements to give us a feel for the enormous wholeness of heaven. Every-thing is proportionate to everything else. Nothing is out of place. Nothing is awkward. Everything fits. It is a place of harmony and balance.

Heaven is light-filled. It is a place where there is no need for the sun or the moon or the stars because God is our light. The first work of the creation story, "Let there be light," is taken to new levels in this image of heaven. We human beings need light to see and in John's vision heaven is filled with exuberant, extravagant light. And the light brings out the kaleidoscopic blaze of colors of precious stones. There are no longer shadows or dark places to hide, the fear of the night is gone.

The third feature we will look at more closely next week- heaven is a place of abundant life with enough water and food for everyone. Our basic needs are met beyond expectation.

Another surprise is that the heavenly city is filled with an innumerable gathering of people from every corner of the world: every tribe, every nation, every language, every race. Within this place of light and safety all people will live in harmony and delight. It is a place where diversity and unity have found balance. It is a radically inclusive place. *"The New Jerusalem is not populated by 'chosen people' only; the*

peoples of the earth, the very nations and even their kings that had opposed God's rule and oppressed the church, are here pictured as redeemed citizens of the Holy City." (3) Now that's my idea of heaven!

We find many wonderful surprises in John's vision. But it is almost as important to notice what we **don't** find. First of all, the sea is gone. Those of us who love the ocean may be disappointed, but remember, in biblical times the sea represented chaos, disorder, and fear. They believed that deadly beasts made their home in the sea. The sea is what separated John from the churches he loved. This image of heaven promises no chaos, no fear. There are also no tears- can you image that? No sorrow. No death. No crying. No pain.

What else don't we find? No sinful practices- nothing cowardly, faithless or polluted will find a home there. There will be no killing, cheating, worshiping of idols, no lying. Justice and right will prevail. *"John does not say that anyone who has ever been guilty of these failings is prohibited from participation in the Holy City, only that no one will bring these sinful practices with them into the City. The list serves to characterize life in the city of God, not a limitation on who will be there."* (4)

Maybe the biggest surprise of all is that there is no temple, no house of worship in the Holy City. A specific building is not necessary because all of life will be lived in the presence of God. All of heaven is a church. The descriptions of the Temple in the Bible make it clear that there is a definite division between the holy and profane- between the religious and the secular. For this reason, the temple had a high wall surrounding it. But in the Holy City of John's vision there is no need for walls that divide. There is a wall but it has twelve huge gates that are **always open**.

There is no need for a Temple, because the whole city is holy. God doesn't live just in the holiest of holies hidden deep inside the temple. God is present, everywhere, at all times. The new heaven is plainly and simply the place where God is. It is the place where humans are fully and totally in relationship with God. It is the place where the face of God- once hidden even from Moses- is on full display to God's beloved people. It is the place where the God we love and worship stands right beside us. This city is the promise of the constant presence of God.

When John wrote this letter the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins, its treasures destroyed, its temple desecrated, its people devastated. The New Jerusalem of his vision is the exact opposite of their reality- it is alive, active, inclusive, beautiful,

beloved, and holy. It is the realization of hope for the human community. It is a place where people depend on and care for one another. On the coin of the day was inscribed the words, "eternal city." Which, of course, meant Rome. But John was showing his people in vivid and intricate detail what a real eternal city looked like and it sure wasn't Rome.

For John, the end is not about an event, or even a place, it is about a Person. The first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, begins with the words, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." The last book of the Bible, *Revelation*, shows God still creating and once again, making all things new. For John, the creation of a new community in communion with God is not the **result** of history, it is the **purpose** of history.

To the Christians surrounded by the powerful and brutal Roman Empire this was incredibly great news! God has the first word and the last word. God is with us in the beginning and in the end and all the times in between. God is where we come from and where we are going. John's letter was an invitation to bold faith. The people were reminded every day that to imagine there was any power beyond the Roman Empire was just crazy. To imagine that the pain and suffering they experienced would be wiped away in the arms of a loving God was more than they could hope for. To imagine that God's promises could be trusted was sometimes hard to believe. But John was calling them to be faithful and to believe that God is just; that God's keeps promises. John tells them in brilliant and extravagant language that Jesus Christ is coming back, and he is moving into their neighborhood.

What those seven congregations heard in worship is the same thing we hear today. We stand firm on one single life-altering hope- that God loves us all. John knew that what people believed about the future affected how they lived their lives every day.

William Willimon suggests that we cannot live responsible, faithful, and ethical Christian lives in the present until God gives us a clear and compelling vision of God's future. The Christian life is too difficult and demanding, he says. How can we continue to follow in the way of Jesus Christ if we don't know where it will take us?

Peterson writes, "*We are now able to look upon the events around us not as a hopeless morass of pagan deception and human misery, but as the birth pangs of a new creation and a beckoning to participate in God's remaking of God's creation.*" (5)

I have to admit I am sometimes finding it hard to be hopeful these days. The political turmoil in our nation is beyond anything I have experienced in my lifetime. Denial of climate change, government inaction and corruption, hints of another war, and attacks on the rights of women, people of color, immigrants, and the poor all have me wondering what the heck happened to our democracy.

I often feel hopeless and helpless. But I believe John's astonishing vision can still speak to us today- in this time and in this place. We must continue to heed his warning that there is a great cost in accommodating to the Empire.

To live faithful lives we need to know who this God is who we claim to worship. To live hopeful lives we need to know what lies ahead. Tom Long writes, "*If we don't have some vision of what God is doing to repair creation, we can't get up and do service to our neighbor every day, because the world will finally beat us down.*"

When we live lives of faith our hope for tomorrow will transform how we live our lives today. John doesn't promise his congregations, and I don't promise you, that the life of faith will be easy- but he does promise that they will not be alone on their journey. He also promises that it will be worth it.

If this vision from John is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God, is finally going, then every thought move, or deed in some other direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted. The picture does not attempt to answer speculative questions about the future; it is offered as an orientation for life in the present." (6)

What awaits the believer and the world at the End of all things- is really a beginning. John's first and last word is "God."

Revelation is not a threat. It is a promise.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

End Notes:

- *REVERSED THUNDER: THE REVELATION OF JOHN AND THE PRAYING IMAGINATION, Eugene H. Peterson, Harper San Francisco, 1988. P. 171.*
- *Peterson, pg. 174- 175.*

- *INTERPRETATION SERIES: REVELATION, Eugene Boring. John Knox. Pg. 221..*
- *Boring, pg. 217-218.*
- *Peterson, pg. 172.*
- *Boring, pg. 224.*