

"THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS"

Revelation 22:1-21

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

"Then the angel showed me the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God, through the middle of the street of the city." (Revelation 22:1-2) *"To the thirsty I will water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." (Revelation 21:6b)*

Two stories this morning. The first is about Scott Warren, a geology professor at Arizona State University, who is on trial in Tucson, Arizona this week on three felony counts. His dastardly crime? Giving water to thirsty people in the desert.

Scott is a humanitarian aid volunteer with "No More Deaths," an organization based in southern AZ, with the goal of ending death and suffering on the US- Mexico border. Volunteers hike into the Sonoran desert where the temperature can reach 120 degrees during the day and plunge to near freezing at night.

They leave behind water, food, socks, blankets, and other supplies for migrants attempting to cross the border. They also search the desert for those who have died and they recover their bodies and sometimes just their bones.

In Ajo, AZ they have a facility called "The Barn" where they provide food, clothing, shelter, and emergency first-aid to those in need. In January 2017 Scott provided care for two young men at The Barn and as they prepared to leave all three were arrested by Border Patrol agents. The two young men, Jose and Kristian, were detained for a few weeks and deposed as material witnesses in the case against Scott. They were then deported to the countries they had fled in fear for their lives. This week Scott is on trial on federal charges- one count of conspiring to transport (human smuggling) and two counts of harboring undocumented immigrants. If the jury finds him guilty on all charges, he could face twenty years in prison---- for offering a cup of cold water.

Until two years ago the aid workers and Border Patrol had a cordial relationship- some are neighbors in their small town of Ajo. But in recent months Border Patrol has arrested several aid workers, refused the permits they needed to hike into the desert wildlife preserve, and slashed and emptied water jugs into the dirt.

Volunteers face fines of \$10,000 when they are charged with "abandonment of property" for leaving life-saving supplies in the desert for migrants. For generations the people of Ajo have provided food and water for those seeking asylum. (It is legal to seek asylum in this country.) They know the dangers of the desert and try to provide kindness to all who need it. Apparently our government is now criminalizing humanitarian aid.

"On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22:2b)

The second story: On September 11, 2001, our nation watched in horror as hijacked airplanes crashed into the World Trade Towers, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. Very quickly US airspace was closed to all air travel. International flights already in the air on their way to land in the US were diverted to airports outside the country. Within three hours thirty-eight jumbo jets were forced to land at Gander International Airport in Gander, Newfoundland- population 9,600. On a busy day that airport may receive a half a dozen planes. After spending nearly 24 hours on their planes, the passengers and crews were allowed to disembark- all 7,000 of them- with only their carry-on luggage. The non-human passengers included nine cats, eleven dogs, and two endangered bonobo chimpanzees- which were all cared for in a makeshift animal shelter in an empty airplane hanger.

For almost five days the people of Gander and the surrounding small villages housed, fed, and entertained what they called, the "plane people," many of whom did not speak English. Striking school bus drivers returned to work. Schools, churches, community centers, and private homes opened their doors to strangers from other nations. Restaurants, grocery stores, and bakeries emptied their shelves and provided as much food as they could get ahold of. Pharmacies filled 2,000 emergency prescriptions in one night and handed out diapers, toiletries, and other necessities. Local companies provided phones and computers so the "plane people" could reach their relatives. Television sets were kept on night and day so everyone could follow the news. All of this at no cost to the travelers. Volunteers went for days without sleep. And they worried about an approaching hurricane moving up the coast.

Newfoundlanders provided comfort to a couple whose son was a New York City Firefighter who died in the towers; to a pilot whose friend was flying the plane that hit the Pentagon. They provided support and a quiet place to pray to Muslim passengers who were bullied by a few others. They helped take care of infants and toddlers whose parents were exhausted and frightened.

They played matchmakers for a young couple, one from the US and one from England, who met and fell in love during their time in Gander. (They later married and honeymooned in Newfoundland.) They introduced the "plane people" to local customs, music, and food. On the tenth anniversary of the attacks, many of the travelers returned to Gander for a memorial service. They have sent money and set up scholarships to show their gratitude for the kindness they received. When the local people were asked how they could have possibly taken care of so many without any monetary rewards they said, "Because that's what you do. You help each other."

This story is told in a fascinating book called, *THE DAY THE WORLD CAME TO TOWN*. It has also been made into a Broadway musical, "Come From Away". I was listening to the sound track as I wrote this sermon.

Poet Robert Browning was right. Earth **IS** crammed with heaven, isn't it? A cup of cold water in the wilderness. A safe place to stay when you can't get home. These are the marks of heaven on earth. This is what the reign of God looks like.

This is the vision John was painting in his letter to the seven churches in Asia. This is the true spirit of the book of Revelation, a celebration of the re-birth of the beloved community.

Like John, we know that the Empire of evil still haunts our world- making home such a dangerous place that you must take your children and flee across a foreign border; arresting those who provide support in the desert; turning airplanes into bombs that destroy thousands of lives. This is the mark of evil. This is what the world looks like when we turn our backs on the God we claim to worship. This is what happens when good people do nothing.

In the last chapter of Revelation we see the completion of John's vision. The holy city has come down out of heaven to earth. God has moved into our neighborhood and is present with us. Throughout the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament we see who God really is in the person of Jesus. And Jesus is all about love, care, mercy, acceptance, and grace.

So how in the world did we ever get the idea that the book of Revelation predicts a horrific and terrifying end of the world orchestrated by this same God? It makes absolutely no sense that a God of love who created the heavens and the earth and declared it good, would one day decide to blow it all to smithereens. That isn't the God we see in Jesus Christ. And it wasn't the God Pastor John encouraged his congregations to worship.

In this final chapter of his revelation John shows us the third feature of heaven. Last week we talked about the perfect symmetry of the vast space encompassed by the holy city and the never-ending, glorious light. This week we see the fertility and abundance symbolized by the river of life and the tree of life placed right smack dab in the middle of the city. All basic needs are met beyond comprehension. There is no end to the nourishment God offers to God's children. Eugene Peterson says that in this heavenly vision, "*We get what we need to be who we are; to be fully human.*" (1)

Peterson says that evil starves us of what we need to live all the while overloading us on what we don't need but think we do. Sort of like feeding us a steady diet of junk food when what we really need are fruits and vegetables. Before too long we become spiritually malnourished and dehydrated. He says that heaven will not be a paradise for consumers. It is **not** an extension of human greed upwards but an invasion of God's presence downward to where we are.

Peterson writes, "*People get so interested in everything in this book except God, losing themselves in symbol hunting, intrigue with numbers, speculating with frenzied imaginations on time and seasons, despite Jesus' severe stricture against it. Nothing is more explicit in this book than that it is about God. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ, not the end of the world, not the identity of the antichrist, not the timetable of history.*" (2)

Pastor John writes his letter as a call to action. The first thing he wants his people to do is to worship.

Nothing in this book is comprehensible except through faith in Christ. Nothing has meaning apart from a relationship with him. Throughout the letter to the seven congregations, John calls them to worship. He did it himself in exile on Patmos.

Peterson writes, "*The work of Worship gathers everything in our common lives that has been dispersed by sin and brings it to attention before God; at the same time, it gathers everything in God's revelation that has been forgotten in our distracted hurrying and puts it before us so that we can offer it up in praise and obedience. All of this does not take place in a single hour of worship. But, faithfully repeated, week after week, year after year, there is an accumulation to holiness.*" (3)

John believed that evil's purpose is, as Peterson writes, "*to normalize Christians into a homogenized Roman pudding of good citizens who really should try to get along with each as best they can. When this work is successful, everyone becomes a Christian in a way that it makes no difference.*" (4)

The greatest danger for Christians in John's time, and I believe, in ours, isn't that Christians will become atheists or convert to another religion. The greatest danger is that Christians will become bland, lukewarm, and too at ease with their "comfortable religion."

Friday evening, I sat in the chapel at the Lutheran School of Theology in Hyde Park and listened, spellbound, to one of my spiritual heroes, the Reverend Dr. William Barber. He is an internationally respected and highly sought-after activist, preacher, teacher, and leader of a call for a national moral revival. Most importantly, to him, he is the pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. In fact, he left the conference early to fly back to his church to officiate at a funeral on Saturday.

Reverend Barber told us that *"faith must create a quarrel with the world. If it doesn't then it is spiritually suspect."* He repeated over and over that God calls us to care for the vulnerable. How we treat the poor is the number one indicator of the moral center of our nation. And currently, it appears that we have lost that moral center.

He quoted German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said, *"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless."*

He called us, as religious leaders, pastors, and theologians, to properly interpret this moment in history- just as John did in his letter. And to not only speak, but also to act with a sense of urgency. John wasn't worried that the people in his churches would suddenly become pagan idol worshipers. He feared that they would acquiesce to the power of the Roman Empire and water down their faith in the Risen Christ until it had lost all meaning.

In the first chapter and in the last chapter John writes the same thing: the purpose of this vision from God is *"to show what must soon take place."* Everything John wrote was immediately relevant. He believed that Jesus would return in his lifetime. So, this return provides a goal that shaped and unified the life of the Christian community. John speaks of urgency but he is not in a panic. If he was, he would not have written such a complex and intricate letter but would have instead written a simple slogan, or an easily read bumper sticker. Urgency does not mean hurry.

The urgency is in the importance of attending to the presence of God and God's call in our lives. When we do this then the future can be experienced as a source of expectation that pours energy into the present.

Peterson warns that "people who are preoccupied with **predicting** the future never seem to be interested in **preparing** for the future, which is something that people do by feeding the poor, working for justice, loving their neighbors, developing a virtuous and compassionate life in the name of Jesus. Prediction becomes a substitute for action."

Physicist Niels Bohr once said, "Prediction is a very difficult art, especially when it involves the future." (5)

John is not a fortune teller. He is not a salesman selling a fantasy of heaven. John is a pastor offering a word of hope and promise to his beleaguered and beloved congregations. This text offers us a rare glimpse of how an early Christian hoped for the future. And what he hopes- based on what he knows about scripture and who he believes God to be- is a city that is a place of life, healing, and love.

It is a place that is the opposite of the Empire. The whole book of Revelation is an indictment against the domination and corrupting power of the Babylonian and Roman Empires, and by implication, of all empires- including ours. It is a promise that the God who stands at the beginning of history also stands at its ending. John's letter points us away from sky gazing and orients us toward the everyday work of the faithful- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, freeing the oppressed, offering a cup of cold water- and making sure it is lead free, providing shelter for those who can't go home. We are to be about the work of Christ: healing a broken world, cleansing a world made unclean by evil.

John called his people and he calls us to look upon the realities of our world not as a hopeless mess of human misery, but as the birth pangs of a new creation and a calling to participate in God's re-making and renewal of God's exquisite and amazing creation.

How marvelous it is that the final words of this letter are words of inclusion and grace. "Let **everyone** who is thirsty come. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen."

Let all of God's children say Amen!

End Notes:

- REVERSED THUNDER: THE REVELATION OF JOHN AND THE PRAYING IMAGINATION, Eugene H. Peterson. Harper San Francisco. 1988. Pg. 181.
- Peterson, pg. 187.
- Peterson, pg. 189.

- Peterson, pg. 190.
- Peterson, pg. 193.