

Easter 5 C Sermon
Revelation 21:1-6
May 15, 2022

From Replacement to Redemption
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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s peoples, and God will be with them in the flesh; ⁴God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also God said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then God said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

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A priest and pastor from the local parishes are standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that reads, “The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!” They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car. “Leave us alone you religious nuts!” yelled the first driver as he sped by. From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash. “Do you think,” said one clergyperson to the other, “we should just put up a sign that says ‘Bridge Out’ instead?”¹

¹ “Let This Be A Warning,” Jokes-archive.com, <https://www.joke-archives.com/?cat=28>.

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With its dire warnings about the “end,” its frustratingly coded images, and bizarre predictions the Book of Revelation gets a pretty bad wrap from many of us in the progressive Christian tradition. Sadly, most of what we actually know about the book comes from sources like the “Left Behind” series, from the rantings of modern-day religious nut jobs, or from bumper stickers that say things like, “In the event of the rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned.”

I think, however, if we cut through some of the incendiary rhetoric, cultural ignorance, bad theology, and general resistance to deal with a piece of writing that seems, at least on the surface, to spell certain doom for the world, we might find something in Revelation worth attending to.

Written around 95 C.E. during the reign of Emperor Domitian, Revelation is a pastoral letter to seven churches in Asia Minor. The author, John, maybe the apostle, but probably not, wrote to encourage his fellow believers who were experiencing some scattered and sporadic persecution for their faith. Employing symbolic language, dualistic categorizations like good and evil, light and dark, God and Satan, and the fervent expectation of history’s near end and God’s ultimate triumph, the author sought to buoy down-hearted Christians and embolden complacent ones—a worthwhile endeavor for our time too, I think.

At the culmination of his letter, John describes God’s ultimate victory over evil and paints a beautiful and hopeful picture of the future, unparalleled in scripture. He writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is

among mortals...”⁴ God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

It gives me goose bumps just reading it! And that’s what it’s meant to do: to give us goose bumps, to inspire us, to fill us with hope, and give us a heavenly dream to work towards. Unfortunately, rather than inspiring communities to action, John’s vision has led many to rest on their laurels, waiting for divine intervention to make this vision a reality instead of actively participating in such holy work. I’m reminded of the old saying, “too heaven minded, no earthly good.” These folks wait to go to heaven themselves or for heaven to come on Earth rather than bringing that heavenly realm to those people and communities who need it most, here and now.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Earth Day. It’s almost a pity this passage didn’t fall closer to it. But, then you would have missed my titillating sermon on Doubting Thomas. Nonetheless, it contains a message that is particularly pertinent to us as we consider our own care for the earth. Sadly, some of the most staunchly anti-environmentalist folks in the country are Christians. At a conference a few years ago, the pastor and founder of a 14,000-member congregation stated: “I know who made the environment and he’s coming back and going to burn it all up. So yes, I drive an SUV.”² My point in bringing up this minister’s comments isn’t to criticize or guilt-trip those of us who drive SUVs, but rather to challenge the kind of “throwaway theology which sees the created world as disposable, ‘burned up’ as rubbish, while Christians are snatched away.”³

² Russ Pierson and John Roe. “Gas Guzzlers a Mark of Masculinity,” Sojo.net, May 9, 2013, <https://sojo.net/articles/mark-driscoll-gas-guzzlers-mark-masculinity>.

³ Ibid.

A thoughtful reading Revelation suggests, however, is that heaven's plan isn't the replacement of our earth home, but is instead its renewal. In the divine voice, the author says, "See, I am making all things new" and not "I am making all new things." The eschatological hope of the book of Revelation is not the destruction and replacement of the earth, but its ultimate redemption.

A few moments ago, I mentioned that the author of Revelation wrote this letter to buoy down-hearted Christians and embolden complacent ones with a heavenly dream, not just to look forward to, but to work towards. Throughout the Bible, we are constantly reminded that care for humanity and care for the world in which we live is divine. From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of divinity that is constantly re-covenanting with the human family to restore relationships, redeem communities, and renew the earth. To think that suddenly, in the book of Revelation, God would be about anything else is utterly absurd.

Equally absurd, though, is a belief that God will somehow do this work with any hands, but our own. That is precisely what it means to be the body of Christ in the world—to be the hands and feet, eyes, ears, mouths, mind, and heart through which heaven's dream of restoration, redemption, and renewal is accomplished.

As Christians, our mandate isn't to sit around waiting for God to start the great cosmic clean-up described in Revelation, but to see the divine already at work restoring the earth and roll up our sleeves and join in the task.

In 1909, Walter Russell Bowie, an Episcopal priest, and later, a chaplain serving in France during World War I and finally a professor at Union Theological Seminary, penned words to the now well-known hymn, "O Holy City, Seen of John." Bowie

believed that the mandate for making the dream of our text from Revelation a reality was our own. I'd like to close with these words from Bowie's hymn⁴:

*Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that has stayed
too long a dream, whose laws are love, whose ways are your own ways,
and where the sun that blazes is your grace all our days.*

*Already in the mind of God that city is prepared
Oh, how its splendor challenges the souls that greatly dare,
Yes, bids us seize the whole of life and build its glory there.*

May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Nick LaRocca. "History of Hymns: 'O Holy City, Seen of John,'" Umediscipleship.org, June 17, 2013, <https://www.umediscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-holy-city-seen-of-john>.