

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 2, 2010
5th Sunday of Easter
Revelation 21:1-6

At Home With God

In these weeks following Easter, when we continue to ponder the amazing good news of God's victory over all death in the resurrection from the dead of Jesus, we have been looking to the last book of the Bible for our inspiration this year. The Revelation to John is one of the most mysterious and yet intriguing of all the books in the Bible. It's a book that is filled with strange imagery that conjures up a vision of a place or places very different from the world in which we live. At times the images and visions can be off-putting at best or frightening at worst. But as we have been taking a closer look at this book in this season we have been declaring that when it's all said and done, the message of this book is a simple one: in the end, God wins and good is stronger than evil. In saying this, it's important to quickly add that to say that God wins does not mean that therefore we lose. On the contrary, central to God's winning is our reconciliation with God that is made real in the work of God's son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

Nowhere is this wonderful message made more clear than in the image of a new heaven and a new earth in which God declares that the home of God is among mortals. "He will dwell with them they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he 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. (Rev. 21:3-4) Over the ages these particular words have been recited as a comfort to those who are facing death or who are mourning the death of someone dear to them. I have read them in countless memorial services over the course of my ministry. For indeed the truth that they convey is a truth that is central to our Christian conviction that when this earthly life is ended, the life at home with God continues for eternity. As you can well understand, these words have been powerful to me and my family in these last few days.

By limiting our reading of this scripture to the context of a funeral or memorial service when the life of one who has died is memorialized, the full extent of its import can be diminished. For God's home among mortals is by no means limited to that future destiny that awaits us someday. God's home among mortals is not time bound or confined by human biological chronology or even by historical chronology. This is one of those places for which the emphasis of our Reformed Presbyterian heritage on the awesome sovereignty of God is called. Too often, way too often, we tend to limit God or fence God in. And when that happens we can find ourselves on the "other" side of that fence or demarcation—the side on which God is not. But these boundaries, these definitions, they're of our own making and have no place in the expansive world view that God intends.

When we encounter these words of hope and encouragement at the time of death—that threshold between this life and the next—we're acknowledging the incredible comfort there is in having a sure and certain confidence that the future that awaits us is such that we can joyfully anticipate it.

But Darrell W. Johnson, who has written extensively on Revelation, points to a number of observers who note that to live in the present is to teeter precariously between the past and the future. Even when we think that we are most fully in the present, the future into which we are continuously moving has an effect on the present. He cites

philosopher Dallas Willard: “The human mind *must* have some picture of the future. . . . The ‘present moment’ is seldom ever wholly present: every ‘present moment’ always partakes of the immediate past and of the immediate future.” (*Discipleship on the Edge* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), p. 359)

It’s at this point that that future reality as it exists as described in John’s revelation has a profound impact on the present in which we find ourselves. Yes, the worst aspects, events both naturally occurring as well as those caused by people and people themselves are all seen and understood differently by the people who understand our God who is at home among us.

There’s one particular aspect of this part of John’s vision that I think is especially interesting and perhaps a bit challenging for those of us here in Montana, the state that we have affectionately named, “God’s Country.” It comes in verse 2 of this 21st chapter. “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Did you catch that? A holy city, the new Jerusalem. A city? The place where you will find God? You gotta be kidding. I thought God was up in the mountains or out on the prairie, away from all of that. I thought God was found in the serenity of a meadow covered with glistening snow in the winter and festooned with wildflowers in the summer. God’s place is in a crowded city like Jerusalem? Wait a second, don’t we Montanans love to brag that we can hike up and back down a forested canyon and go the whole day without seeing another person and count that as a particularly spiritual experience? There’s no solitude, no serenity, no going without seeing other people in a city. For a city by its very definition is teeming with people. So to be at home with God is to be among those teeming crowds?

Biblical commentators have often pointed out that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. The story of the Bible begins with isolated human creatures in amongst the rest of the animals and plants in a primitive setting and it ends in the midst of the organization and connectedness of a city. Is there significance to this? There is indeed.

There are a couple of features of this visionary city that are described here as characteristic that won’t be found there. The sea will be no more. For the readers of John’s day, this was a powerful statement. For in that culture the sea was understood as a symbol of chaos and separation and in this particular case an almost uncrossable divider between God and human beings.

Also, there will be death no more, mourning and crying and pain will also be no more. These declarations perhaps more than others are the full evidence that in the end God wins. For even the power, threat and sting of death itself is eliminated.

The future vision that is held before us is one that has the peoples of the world as intricately related to one another and united in a focus on the God who is seated on the throne, united by Jesus. Eugene Peterson puts it this way,

The biblical story began, quite logically, with a beginning. Now it draws to an end, not quite so logically, also with a beginning. The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of Revelation. The product of these beginning and ending acts of creation is the same: “the heavens and earth” in Genesis, and “a new heaven and new earth” in

Revelation. The story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its last word.” (*Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 169)

When we hold onto God’s future as we make our way through the challenges of our living in this 21st century, that promised vision, that promised future will become a part of our present as well. The challenges to peace and justice, the inequities of resources and needs, the predominance of fear and trembling will be softened and eventually the present day reality and the future vision will mold and meld into one.

That city in which we live as the mortals in God’s realm turns out to be an important part of who we are as disciples of Jesus. Our connections with each other, our accountability to one another, and our union with one another are integral to who we are as God’s people.

Of the many layers of meaning and significance to our regularly joining together in a shared meal around the table of our Lord is to emphasize our interconnectedness and our oneness in Christ. Today as we come to the table for the elements of bread and juice I encourage you to pay attention to those around you. They’re your sisters and brothers in Christ. They are your fellow citizens in the city of God. They are a reminder to you of our being at home with God.