

Sermon: April 24, 2016 – Revelation 21: 1-6
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

*“I see a new heaven. I see a new earth as the old one will pass away,
 Where the fountain of life flows and without price goes to all people who abide in the land.”*

These evocative words by hymn-writer Carolyn McDade, who led a workshop here at Ralph Connor just two weeks ago, lead us into a consideration of the 21st chapter of Revelation: its message to us as Christians, and within that, its message to us on Earth Sunday 2016.

Few books in the Bible are as polarizing as the Book of Revelation. Seminary professor Adam Copeland, writing in 2013, describes it as a cross between John Stewart's *Daily Show* and a Stephen King novel, intermingling political satire with a narrative that is, in places, truly creepy. While some parts of the Bible, most notably the second half of the book of Daniel and one section of 2nd Thessalonians deal with the end times, the book of Revelation is the only full book of the Bible that one would call “apocalyptic literature.”

For some, that makes it the most important book of the Bible, giving a literal roadmap of the end times and how we will be judged. For these folks, each symbol and event in Revelation gets analyzed and aligned with current events, with the end result being a calculation of when the world will end. Back in 2011 billboards popped up all over the place, including at least one in Calgary, advertising the date when everyone needed to have things in order; 70 years earlier, during the 2nd World War, the personas and actions of the Nazis led some to believe that that they were seeing the book of Revelation play out in real time, with the beast, the antichrist, and the horsemen of the Apocalypse rolled into one.

For others, Revelation is easily side-stepped and ignored because of its weirdness. I have to admit, as a fairly practically-minded person I tend to fall into this category. I hear tell that Eugene Peterson, who we know primarily as the Bible scholar who produced “The Message” version of the Bible, has done an excellent study on Revelation, but somehow I manage to keep that down at about number seven in my list of “top ten books I should read next,” never getting much higher than that. Especially in these days, when North American Churches are having such a hard time presenting ourselves to the culture around us as a voice of reason, the heavily symbolic book of Revelation is hardly the place I would begin a marketing campaign for Christianity.

In between these two polar positions is a place I'd like to get to: a place of curiosity. Self-described as being written by a Christian mystic named John of Patmos to seven Churches in what we now call Turkey, one wouldn't really call it an Epistle like 1st Corinthians or Galatians. Those books, by the apostle Paul, offer detailed encouragement to Churches facing specific challenges from outside or within, while the encouragement that Revelation offers is somewhat between-the-lines, keeping some of the most accusatory comments of the opponents of the seven Churches shrouded in secrecy for safety's sake. John needs for these Churches, under heavy persecution, to know that somebody knows what's going on, that the everlasting God is not blind to their plight, and that the power of Christ's resurrection will eventually win the day.

After twenty chapters of rambling symbolism and heightened anxiety, we arrive at today's reading: Revelation's vision of a new heaven and new earth. After spending so much time talking about beasts and dragons and growing turbulence and the destruction of Babylon, what is said in chapter 21 comes as a series of wonderful surprises: relevant, hopeful, grounded surprises.

Starting at the end of today's scripture and working backwards: **pleasant surprise number one is what an earthy vision this is.**

Hear these words of glorious hope, as verse 6 describes the new realm: “To anyone who is thirsty I will give the right to drink from the spring of the water of life without paying for it.” Or, in the words of Carolyn McDade, God's new realm is the place “where the fountain of life flows and without price goes to all people who abide in the land.” I have always pictured this vision of a new world as a soft-focus, gauzy, semi-transparent entity, the new Jerusalem descending from the sky like some sort of holy hologram - but it's not that at all. This new place is every bit as real as the one we live in right now, except that in this new place Shalom is the rule. It's a place where there is health, wholeness, opportunity and life in abundance for all, not just for the sly, the connected or the wealthy.

Just imagine that for a moment: a promise of a world where have and have-not are replaced by equal access to all. Imagine the precious gift of clean, drinkable water treated as a right for all people rather than a saleable commodity. Imagine a world freed from drought and starvation, a world where no child dies of malnutrition or cholera or dysentery. As we give thanks for those who work tirelessly to bring safe water to remote villages in the southern hemisphere, we imagine a very different world where such efforts were not needed, for in that world all have what they need.

What we have here is a statement of Divine intention. It is God's ultimate intention that there be no impediments to all people getting what they need to enjoy the gift of life.

What a great endorsement this is for any social justice efforts that we undertake, as a congregation, as a denomination, as individuals, as volunteers in non-profit organizations. When we participate in programs or actions that extend God's love - without reserve, without barriers, without judgment - we are expressing the very heart of God. We are touching that new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem and saying, "these are not just future promises. This is where God lives even now: in the dismantling of systems that impoverish millions while providing safe haven for the few, in confronting violence and discrimination, in simple actions and huge movements that insure clean water, healthy land and breathable air for our species and for all the flora and fauna with whom we share this planet. While expressed as a future event by John of Patmos, the ever-present God yearns for these things even now.

Pleasant surprise number two, is **God's consistent desire for new beginnings.**

Nicely in the lead at the final round of The Master's Golf Tournament two weeks ago, Jordan Spieth stepped to the tee on the par three 12th hole. His tee shot nearly made it to the green, then rolled back into the water. His next shot was worse, taking a lazy loop into the drink. On his third shot – or should I say, fifth shot counting the penalties – he overshot the green and landed in a sand-trap. His chances of repeating as Master's champion basically ended on that hole.

Unlike the unbending rules of the PGA golf tour, I am always amazed at God's graciousness in giving us "mulligans" in life. God repeatedly pursues new beginnings, second chances and reconciliation, and when we are on our game we pursue those things with God. Throughout the stories of the Bible we encounter characters who had no right to be forgiven, who by our standards should have been cast out into the darkness: Moses killed a man in anger, David had Bathsheba's soldier husband sent to certain death at the front lines, Peter lied about his connection to Jesus not once, but three times – yet Moses led his people from slavery to freedom, David is still renowned as the ideal King, and Jesus the good shepherd named Peter to lead his flock once he was gone, three times saying to Peter, "if you love me, feed my sheep" mirroring the three times Peter had said, "I am not his follower, I don't even know the man." If a by-the-book, judgmental approach had been applied to these three individuals, none of them would have had the opportunity to lead, but that's not how God works.

Whenever the old and destructive needs to end and the new and constructive needs to begin, God is found as the change-agent in the midst of it. Whether an addiction has power over you and you need to invite God to restore you to sanity, or your life is ruled by regret or anger or grudge that needs to be released, it's a spiritual process and God is there. Within the United Church of Canada, we are now thirty years in to a process of repentance and reconciliation with our indigenous sisters and brothers, and in spite of the slow progress we see Creator God in the midst of that work. And then there's our world's addiction to carbon-based energy, and the temperatures that climb each month that even the hardest climate change denier cannot help but notice. We have treated creation with such disrespect that slight tinkering will no longer suffice: we need the kind of all-in, totally new mindset that is of God. All these things are going to have to change, but will not change unless we tap into God's yearning for a world made new.

While a new heaven and a new earth is portrayed by the book of Revelation as a future culmination of history, the reality is that God brings renewal over and over and over again in our lives and the life of the world, even now. Partnering with God is not something that has to wait; it is a lifestyle we can enter into, any time.

Which brings us to our third point, and that is the direction of God's activity in all of this. **This is a story of God engaging with the world, not humanity exiting this world to be with God.**

Nazarene pastor Danny Quarstrom has these eloquent words for us:

“As we’re coming to the culmination of the Revelation we see that it’s not about us being pulled away from this earth, it’s about God drawing close to this earth! The home of mortals isn’t in heaven, the home of God is among mortals! In the lyric of verse 3 we hear [that] God ‘will dwell’ with them... literally, God will ‘tabernacle’ with humans. This is the same description as John 1:14, ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us...’

“The Revelation of Jesus given to John isn’t about the faithful avoiding difficulty or being raptured out of tribulation but is about God making God’s tabernacle, dwelling place, in the heart of this earth. God will wipe away every tear. This is the new thing God is doing.”

The Church is often accused of perpetuating a theology of “pie in the sky when you die”, which assigns goodness and holiness to some time after we leave this life... and, by so doing, justifies the oppression of those who have nothing and the perpetuation of endless comfort for their oppressors, since it will all be evened up in the afterlife. Over the ages, the Church has earned this criticism, but one of the advantages that has come in recent years as the Church has lost much of its power is that we are experiencing first hand what life is like out on the fringes. And the remarkable thing out here, is that life on the margins is in many ways closer to God – because God has always had a special connection with those who struggle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness. God is not up there somewhere, to be met later-but-not-now, distanced from us by time or space. The newness that is God and is of God, comes to us at God’s initiation rather than waiting at a distance. God is love, and in that simple assertion we realize that in our loving – whether the tender love of compassion, or the brave love of advocacy – God is known. Not just in heaven, not just in future, but here, and now, with these people and in the midst of this world. Or to put it another way that you may have heard, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In today’s reading, we experience a God who is as close to us as our next breath, and as present to us as our highest hopes. The God you experience when enjoying the beauty of a mountain hike and the God you engage in prayer when you are worried about the world around you, is the same God. The God whose vision of equality you yearn for is the same loving presence that has been your companion since birth, your source and destination, your alpha and omega. The God whose creative energy infuses the space between us, is the same God whose reconciling grace can energize our efforts to solve the environmental mess that thoughtless human greed has created. There is most definitely work to do in our lives and in the life of the world, AND there is a Divine partner who loves us desperately, who is already part-way down the path.

*“I see a new heaven. I see a new earth as the old one will pass away,
Where the fountain of life flows and without price goes to all people who abide in the land.” Amen.*

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