

Revelation 21.1, 10, 21.22-22.5
John 14.23-29
6th Sunday of Easter

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

The Urban Eden

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” That’s how the bible starts in Genesis. And here we are at almost the very end in the book of Revelation, and we hear, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” So this ending, the last chapters of the last book of the bible, is really not an ending, but a beginning. A new heaven and a new earth.

The way much popular Christian theology is arranged, a lot of people think the book of Revelation is about the destruction of the earth—when people will have “666,” the number of the Beast, tattooed on their foreheads and cars will careen recklessly when their drivers are raptured and ascend into heaven.

I think I’ve told the story before of being in junior high and coming home terrified one night after a youth group meeting. Whether the book of Revelation was the intended youth group topic or whether the conversation wandered there, I remember the dire warnings about how terrible it would be in the last days and how we all had to walk the straight and narrow so that we’d be in the first bunch of people raptured instead of sticking around for the tribulation when everyone suffered. When I got home from youth group that night I threw myself on my bed and cried and cried because I was so frightened about what life was going to be like in “the end times.”

I didn’t hear anything about the new heaven and new earth God was creating. All I heard about was terror.

Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor and writer, says the Revelation of John is writing to revive our imaginations. John “takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us in an ‘animated and impassioned dance of ideas.’”¹ The Revelation is a poetic re-telling of what we’ve been reading since we opened up the bible at Genesis 1. Sometimes when we read all those intervening passages, our eyes glaze over; we get bored with the story; we think we’ve heard it all before. The Revelation of John wakes us up again with a “world of sky battles between angels and beasts, lurid punishments and glorious salvations, kaleidoscopic vision and cosmic song.”² Peterson says, “The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it.”³ And then he quotes Wendell Berry who says, “The imagination is our way into the divine Imagination, permitting us to see wholly—as whole and holy—what we perceive as scattered, as order what we perceive as random.”⁴

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Revered Thunder – The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, Harper San Francisco, 1988, p. xii.

² *Ibid.*, p. x.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

And then we're off and running with John who, while imprisoned on the island of Patmos, had a vision of God that he captures in this deeply theological and evocatively poetic writing in what we call the Book of Revelation.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. We know from the very first chapter of Genesis that all that God created was good. From the beginning, the heavens and the earth were steeped in goodness.

And at the end we hear the new heavens and the new earth are a reality of goodness.

The problem is now. There's not as much goodness. There's still plenty of it but it's tainted in places and severely beaten down in others.

In such a time, some religious traditions point to heaven and say, "Won't it be grand when we get there?" The sufferings of this world will all pass away when we fly away to heaven.

But John's Revelation reveals something different. Did you hear John say the spirit carried him to a high mountain and showed him the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God? (21.10) And a loud voice said, "See the home of God is among mortals." (21.3)

That's not a picture of escaping the travails and tribulations of this world to get to heaven. That's a picture of heaven coming to earth. The City of God coming to the city of earth.

Sometimes when I say that I think of a spaceship—you know the round, hovering Martian craft, with spot lights shining down on the earth. But I don't think that's quite it. Heaven is the fullness, it's the completion of what is now. It's the wholeness of what is now partial and broken. God has not abandoned us; God is right in our midst—as God was in the first creation. The Revelation "visualizes a new urban Eden, a paradise where the water of life flows in the city with the tree of life restored for the healing of the nations."⁵ It is the place where God lives and where we live with God. Not in a future life and not as an escape from this world. But here and now.

Jesus says a similar thing in the fourth gospel. He is preparing his disciples for what is coming and how they are to live. He says he is going away and also will return to be with them. For those who love him, he says of himself and God, "We will come and make our home with them."

Now here's the sticking point. What if we don't want God to come live with us? Visit for three days, okay. But move in? That's not quite what we bargained for. If God moves in, think of all the house cleaning we'll have to do. We'll have to watch our language all the time. Move the liquor cabinet out to the garage. Not watch so many movies on HBO.

A few years ago I realized that while God and I worked well together, we didn't socialize much outside of the office. Mine was a strictly professional relationship and I was content as God's colleague. After all, God was a handy contact in my line of work. But one day, in a gift of grace, I became aware of the difference between being God's colleague and being God's beloved child. It was an experience of the invisibility of heaven made visible on earth. An experience of living in the urban Eden—in God's presence as God's beloved child. And it changed my life.

I imagine that some of us like the idea of heaven being off in the sky somewhere as the way out of life on earth. We can eat all the chocolate and ice cream we want and never gain a pound. Everyone will be nice and we won't have to deal with the co-worker who gets on our

⁵ David L. Tiede, "The Season of Easter" in *New Proclamation*, Year C, 2007, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006, p52.

nerves or the neighbor who always plays their music too loud. In heaven our children and our parents will be perfect.

But maybe that's not what is so important to God. The bible talks a lot more about justice and wholeness for all people and all of creation than about some of the things we fantasize we'll have in heaven. Perhaps part of the reality of heaven is that we will come to desire what God desires. Not the images we have left over from our Puritan if-you're-enjoying-yourself-it-must-be-wrong ancestors or the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps American myth of individualism. We will love what God loves and so the idea of God coming to live with us will be a glorious thing.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Heaven is not what we wait for until the rapture or where we go when we die, [heaven is] what *is*, barely out of the range of our senses, but brought to our senses by St. John's visions. We are now able to look upon the events around us not as a hopeless morass of...deception and...misery, but as the birth pangs of a new creation and a beckoning to participate in God's remaking of God's creation...Heaven is not fantasy. We have access to heaven now: it is the invisibility in which we are immersed, and that is developing into visibility, and that one day will be thoroughly visible. As the poet Robert Browning put it, 'Earth's crammed with heaven.'"⁶

The Revelation of John helps us see earth crammed with heaven. Helps us orient our lives to the urban Eden and be part of God's new heaven and new earth. Not later. But now.

⁶ Peterson, p 172.