

The New Jerusalem

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at the St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, May 15, 2022.

Revelation 21:1-6

The Revised Common Lectionary skips over a lot of the Book of Revelation between the appointed reading from chapter 7, which we looked at last Sunday, and today's appointed reading from the beginning of chapter 21. Just to catch you up a bit, in the three chapters prior to today's reading, John of Patmos describes visions of the fall of Babylon (Revelation's name for the Roman Empire), the defeat of God's adversaries, the final defeat of Satan, and the last judgment of the dead.

Here in chapter 21, John of Patmos goes on to describe the final renewal of creation, a vision of God "making all things new." John sees "a new heaven and a new earth" and a "new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."

These visions must have been wonderful news to the people to whom John was writing. You will recall that he wrote the Book of Revelation in the late first century to seven churches located in Asia Minor, what is now modern-day Turkey. His audience consisted of people who were suffering under the oppression of the Roman Empire, people who remembered how the Roman Army had crushed the Jewish Revolt in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, killing as many as a million people, destroying the Temple and leaving most of the city in ruins. So to hear of visions of the Roman Empire coming to an end, of God's adversaries being defeated, of a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, must have given them renewed hope that their present sufferings would not last forever, that God would see justice done, that God's reign of peace would eventually prevail.

In this new creation, not only is a new Jerusalem coming down to earth, God is coming down to earth with it. God is making a move from heaven to earth. This new holy city is going to be God's new dwelling place, God's new home. The home of God will be among

mortals. “God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples, and God will be with them; 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.”

I am struck by how different this vision is from the end times idea popular in some Christian circles of the so-called “rapture” in which believing Christians are to be rescued from the earth, taken up to heaven with Christ, while those who remain on earth are left to perish.

This idea has been promoted in Christian novels such as the twelve-volume *Left Behind* series, which began with the 1995 publication of *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*. In it, a mysterious, cataclysmic event occurs. On a Boeing 747 bound for Europe, one third of the passengers suddenly disappear, leaving only their clothes and jewelry behind. Around the world, millions of other people also disappear at the same time, throwing the world into instant chaos. An airline pilot, a journalist, a minister, and a student all search for answers, only to discover that they are entering what will be a seven-year period of tribulation.

“Central to the plot,” according to an assessment by the Presbyterian Church (USA), “is the two-stage return of Christ. Christ has come and has taken the church (the ‘saved’) away from the earth. Those ‘left behind’ have a second chance for salvation and are engaged in a cataclysmic fight with the forces of evil. Evil forces are often disguised as good, so the battle is difficult and confusing. In this struggle with evil, some who are left behind realize the error of their ways, repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and will be rescued at the second stage of the return of Christ when all the saved will be eternally with God and all the damned are sent to hell for eternity.”

This two-stage understanding of the return of Christ is a relatively recent idea. It is attributed to a woman named Maggie MacDonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, who, it is claimed, came to this understanding in the year 1860 while she was in a trance. The idea was further developed by John Nelson Darby and became popular with the introduction of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in

1909. But take note that the term *rapture* does not appear in the Bible anywhere, and it has not been taught in the Presbyterian tradition.

Indeed, the idyllic vision of new heaven and a new earth, of a new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, and of God making God's home on earth is the exact opposite of "the rapture." God doesn't destroy the earth. God renews it. God remakes it. God transforms it. God makes all things new, a new heaven and a new earth, even a new Jerusalem. God doesn't take Christians up to heaven. God brings heaven down to us. God doesn't stay in heaven, apart from us, watching us from a distance. God moves from heaven to the earth to live with us, to be present with us. This is the rapture in reverse.

The Presbyterian assessment continues: "Two things must be said about the theology in the *Left Behind* series. First, as a work of fiction, *Left Behind* does not present biblical teaching or theology in a systematic way. It is informed by a number of biblical passages, but it is, in the end, fiction. It should not be viewed as a key to understanding the Bible or as a textbook that describes the events surrounding the return of Christ. Second, insofar as it is informed by a theological understanding, it is a kind of premillennial dispensationalism" which is not in accord with the theology of the Presbyterian Church.

Now, don't get me wrong. The return of Christ and the final establishment of God's Reign of justice and peace are central to Presbyterian belief and practice. When we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray "Thy kingdom come." And when we celebrate communion together, we hear these words spoken: "Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord until he comes." Our Christian hope is that, at the end of history, Christ will come again to establish God's reign of justice and peace for all Creation. But at the same time, Presbyterians refuse to engage in idle speculation about the timing and details.

And let us admit that John's visions have not come to pass, not entirely. We have seen the fall of Babylon, the fall of the Roman Empire. For that matter, we have seen a number of empires rise and fall through the centuries. The city of Jerusalem has been rebuilt by human hands, but it is not the "New Jerusalem" that John describes as

a place where there is no more death or mourning, no more crying or pain. Far from it. God has not yet made all things new. We have not yet seen a new heaven and a new earth, nor have we seen the second coming of Christ.

We find ourselves living in the “in-between time,” in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” We say that Christ came to reconcile us with God, with one another, and with Creation. We claim that this reconciliation has already been accomplished by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. And yet, our contemporary human experience shows us that we are still alienated from God, still fighting among ourselves, and still destroying God’s Creation. That reconciliation is not yet a reality. Similarly, we say that Jesus came to overcome sin, evil, and death, and that this already has been accomplished. And yet, we see sin, evil, and death all around us. They are not yet overcome.

Our Christian hope is that in the end humanity will truly be reconciled with God; that sin, evil, and death will finally be overcome; and that God’s promised reign of justice and peace will be fulfilled. In the meantime, Revelation invites us to embrace God’s vision for our world not only as a distant hope, but as a guide to living our lives today.

In the last Sunday morning sermon Martin Luther King, Jr., preached, just days before he was assassinated, he communicated this sense of the New Jerusalem being both a future and present reality, a wondrous vision for justice that we can participate in now.

“Thank God for John,” he said, “who centuries ago out on a lonely, obscure island called Patmos caught vision of a new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, who heard a voice saying, ‘Behold, I make all things new—former things are passed away.’ God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons [and daughters] of God will shout for joy.”

May it be so. Amen.