

“On Earth As It Is In Heaven”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Revelations 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

[The Apostle John said,]

I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

*The first heaven and the first earth had disappeared, and so had the sea.
Then I saw New Jerusalem, that holy city, coming down from God in heaven.’*

Revelations 21:1-2

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to make room in our hearts for others – whether we agree with them or not.

Help us to make room for you.

Amen

The Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible and the most controversial.

It is filled with startling imagery –

the stuff of science fiction and apocalyptic dread.

Should it be taken as a literal description of the events at the end of time
or is it just a metaphor for any time, or all times?

Most of it is pretty bleak with all kinds of wars and rumors of war,
earthquakes, plagues, you name it,

but then there is this beautiful image of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’.

We have to remember that Revelation ends – happily.

The kingdom of heaven comes down from God in the form of an immense city.

There is a crystal river to drink from and twelve kinds of trees yielding food to eat.

There is no need for light because it will be everywhere, shining from God;

There is no need for a Temple because God’s presence will be perceived everywhere,
and nothing will be accursed, because God’s sovereignty will prevent it.

In 1999 – as the Millennium approached, there was all kinds of speculation about

“What’s going to happen when all the digital clocks tick over to 2000?”

The Y2K Bug was a big concern – computers might stop working altogether and
disrupt our systems of banking, transportation, and communication.

You can imagine this generated some revenue

for those who said they could provide a remedy.

Terrorists were already high on the list for the role of Anti-Christ,

but the year 2000 came and went without incident.

Then it was 2001, and the events of September 11th neatly provided a boogeyman

and two wars followed, generating revenue for the military-industrial complex

which said they could provide a remedy –

that we’re still paying for with lives and money.

But the promise remains: there will be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’...

Willard, p.2

We shouldn't dwell on the bad things that happen.

We shouldn't sugarcoat them either.

I find myself astonished sometimes by how some people think –
usually by what they say in comments they make on the internet or on TV.
Such banter should challenge us to take a deeper look at our own views –
and our own self-critique can be a good discipline,
so long as it doesn't harden into bitterness.

It is not clear if the New Jerusalem of Revelation
is a description of a future Earth or if it is Heaven itself.
It is not clear what people will be doing in this beautiful city of light
made of translucent gold, with gem-studded walls,
pearly gates dedicated to the 12 tribes of Israel,
and foundations dedicated to the 12 apostles.
Jesus promised us we would have new life, abundant and eternal –
which doesn't sound boring, but it is hard to imagine.

One summer about 20 years ago,
I read a book called The City of Joy by Dominique Lapierre
which weaves the stories of several people living in Calcutta, India.
The timeframe of the story is about the 1970s,
and begins with a drought that forces a farmer to take his family to
the overpopulated city of Calcutta in hopes of finding food and work.

This was a very inspirational book for me – a very powerful book
that helped prepare me for work at a state psychiatric hospital.
One theme from this book that stayed with me was –
despite desperation, there was a way through it all.

This concept – that there was a way through life's troubles, is first demonstrated
when the farmer, Hasari Pal, arrives with his family
in a squatters camp where the people there had nothing more
than a spot on the ground to spread their mats.
In this wasteland of deprivation, the generosity of poor people
becomes evident as they make room for these newcomers,
share what they can – even suggest ideas for where to get work.
Sometimes, that's 'heaven' enough,
while the promise remains: there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'...

Willard, p.3

It occurred to me once that progressive Christians
talk about God's Kingdom in the same way that conservative Christians
talk about Jesus Christ or the Body of Christ.
Christ and the Kingdom are both an unseen reality that is not-yet-here.
But I am troubled there is often an unwillingness on either side
to see these similarities.

I think of the young middle-schooler named Bayli Silberman...

I think of her struggle to get a Gay+Straight Alliance club going
at her school in Leesburg.

She is facing some stiff resistance from the school administration, school board,
and the community itself.

I think of the resistance to 'justice & peace' in general in our world
and those who persevere just the same, to realize their dream.

I think of those who have fought for Civil Rights through speeches and protests,
words and action, nonviolent and yet confrontational.

Even though they were met with terrible resistance to their hope for a better world –
and even though the realization of that hope was "not-yet",
still, they remained faithful to what could yet be.

They still held out for that vision of Beloved Community
as a social reality that is possible 'on Earth as it is in Heaven' ...

They held out for this promise: there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'...

I think of the resistance to better environmental practices

that would benefit us all – not only through improved quality
of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat,
but even the view we get of unbroken green-spaces,
litter-free beaches, deep forests, and clear skies.

Perhaps the goals and practices of the 'environmental movement'
are still inconvenient or vague to many of us,
but thanks to projects like "4/1 Earth" it keeps us aware –
keeps us thinking that visions of 'a new heaven and a new earth'
are still possible.

In Revelation 21:3, the Apostle John said,

'I heard a loud voice shout from the throne:

God's home is now with his people.

He will live with them, and they will be his own.

Yes, God will make his home among his people.'

Willard, p.4

What would that look like?

With such resistance to change, how could God's Kingdom,
or world peace ever be achieved?

I think of the resistance even between well-meaning people – myself included.

How do we find reconciliation – let alone consensus,
when worldviews collide?

But the more we can just accept one another, even when we don't agree –
the more we can love others as human beings deserving of respect,
the greater there will be an opportunity for others
to see the Kingdom, to see the Christ in you.

For the promise remains: there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'...

I am reminded of what my 6th Grade Sunday School teacher said

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a darkened room filled with things
that become visible when you turn the light on."

Faith is the light by which we must make the effort and
love is the lens we must use to see that it's already here.

As the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:12,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Another way of saying this is:

Now, it is like trying to see through a dirty window,
but someday, we will be face to face with each other as we are
just as God through Christ sees and knows and loves each of us.

Amen

Our lesson today is from Revelations 21:1-6.

*It challenges us to imagine a different world –
that can be a better one, from our present.*

21:1 I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

The first heaven and the first earth had disappeared,
and so had the sea.

2 Then I saw New Jerusalem, that holy city,
coming down from God in heaven.

It was like a bride dressed in her wedding gown
and ready to meet her husband.

3 I heard a loud voice shout from the throne:

God's home is now with his people.

He will live with them, and they will be his own.

Yes, God will make his home among his people.

4 He will wipe all tears from their eyes,
and there will be no more death, suffering,
crying, or pain.

These things of the past are gone forever.

5 Then the one sitting on the throne said:

I am making everything new.

Write down what I have said.

My words are true and can be trusted. 6 Everything is finished!

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

I will freely give water from the life-giving fountain
to everyone who is thirsty.

John 13:31-35

[31] When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said,

"Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified;

[32] if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself,
and glorify him at once.

[33] Little children, yet a little while I am with you.

You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you,

'Where I am going you cannot come.'

[34] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;
even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

[35] By this all men will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."