

May 19, 2019
Revelation 21:1-6
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“The Long View”

Good morning! It is good to be back with you on a Sunday morning, even though I saw many of you at services on Friday or Saturday. I'm sure you remember the sermon from May 5, but just in case you weren't able to worship with us that day, here's a bit of review: our text was from Revelation 5, which describes the gathering of the martyrs around the throne of God, on which was seated a Lamb, covered in blood as if it had been killed. See what you missed?

Revelation is the vision of John of Patmos, a vision of what the end of the world will look like: John sees it as a final shown-down between good and evil. And I said, and I still believe, that Revelation -- once you peel away the crazy imagery -- boils down to two essential questions: Who deserves our loyalty? And who is going to win? And spoiler alert: the answer to both those questions is Jesus Christ. Christ, portrayed in Revelation 5 as the Lamb who was killed is worthy of our allegiance, and through his death on a cross has defeated the powers of evil forever. Amen? For me, anyway, once I am grounded in those two questions and the absolute certainty of their answers, some of the weirdness of Revelation goes away.

Although Revelation is a vision of how the end of the world will look, I believe there is a lot of creative imagery in this vision -- much of it targeted to a late 1st century Jewish Christian audience. Part of the reason Revelation has gotten associated with groups who are peripheral to mainstream Christianity is that it has been used -- misused, I believe -- to predict the end of the world. There is a significant difference between *predicting* the end of the world and *describing* it. Predicting the future has always been a risky proposition at best: let's just say there's a huge difference between describing what your life would be like after you win the eight million

dollar jackpot and actually knowing what numbers you have to pick. Revelation is not inaccurate, but the purpose of it is NOT to provide us with a date and time when the world will end.

Christians have a long -- a *really* long -- record of predicting when the world will end. As far as I know, all of those predictions have been false. They began as early as the 300s, and there are predictions at least as far out as 2023. Sometimes the folks who have made these predictions have lost their credibility: sometimes they have lost their lives. Here are a few -- you might actually remember some of the later ones:

- 847 a Christian named Thiota predicted the end of the world. When he confessed he was mistaken he was publically flogged.
- 1507 Italian renaissance painter Boticelli predicted the end of the world
- April 5, 1534 Anabaptist Jan Mathys staged a violent political coup in Muenster, Germany because he believed the world was ending. The attack failed and he was later decapitated.
- 1600 Martin Luther
- 1967 Jim Jones of the People's Temple
- 1982 Pat Robertson of the 700 Club
- January 1, 2000 Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins
- Harold Camping Sept 6, Sept 29, Oct 2 1994, March 31 1995 and October 21, 2011

So what I think we can learn from this is first, that human beings should be careful about presuming to know the mind of God; and second, maybe we need to examine the vision which Revelation is *describing* and consider what our role, if any, might be in participating in that vision. Especially for those who believe in Jesus Christ, this vision is a very positive one. Remember the second question the Revelation asks: Who is going to win? The answer should give us hope.

Revelation 21 has special meaning for me because of its associations with my father and his memorial service in 2007, but it could be a part

of any Christian memorial service. This text makes some claims which may be familiar, and some which we may overlook. Here are the obvious parts of this text: God is creating a new heaven and a new earth, and that there will be no more mourning and no more pain and no more death. That is the hope of heaven which I cling to and which has given hope to Christians for centuries -- especially those whose lives have ended in pain, or who have watched loved ones in pain at the end of their lives. But here are some things I wonder about: why does *heaven* have to be made new? 21:1 says the first *heaven* and the first earth had passed away. And even more interesting, verse 3 says, "the home of God will be among mortals." Wait a minute -- isn't that supposed to be the other way around? Aren't we supposed to leave this earth so we can go to be in heaven with God? Verse 2 says the holy city, the new Jerusalem is coming down out of the heavens from God. Heaven is coming to earth.

This may seem like a small deal, but I believe it is very significant and often overlooked -- and overlooking it can lead to some bad theology with disastrous consequences. Here's why it's significant: whether it's the long view or the short term, the work of God is transformation, not destruction. God destroyed the world once in a great flood, and God made a covenant, sealed with a rainbow, that God would never again destroy the world. When the world became a damned mess--as it is prone to be, people being who they are -- God did not destroy those people. God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to save them. We, of course, are those people. And the last I checked, the world is still a damned mess: but a mess with a difference. The difference is that the world is full of people who have heard the message of Christ and his grace. Jesus taught by word and example that we can be loved even if we are not perfect, that in fact, we can never be perfect, but through Christ we can be made whole. Through Christ we can be transformed.

I don't know about you, but when I acknowledged Jesus as Lord -- worthy of my loyalty -- there were a lot of things that did not change. I didn't get better looking, I didn't get smarter, I had the same sense of humor, I was still basically an introvert, and I still had the same family, the same history, the same baggage I had before. My past did not change. I didn't know what my future would look like, but I committed it to trying my best to follow Jesus. Despite some memorable lapses,

by the grace of God I have remained committed to Jesus Christ. He is worthy of my loyalty, and he is going to win in the end, whatever I go through in the middle. So, I am the same person or a different person than when I committed my life to Christ?

I do not subscribe to a God of violence, a God who would destroy me in order to create a better version -- Rosanna 2.0. If God would not do this to me, personally, how could I believe that God is going to destroy God's own creation, the world and everything in it? I am not the same person I was before I accepted Christ -- not only have a couple decades passed, but changing my allegiance, giving my loyalty to Christ is transformative. I have no doubt that I would be a different person without the grace of Christ. I certainly wouldn't be standing here.

As Christians, I believe we participate in the new heaven and new earth when we participate in and proclaim the transformative power of God right now, wherever we are. God's transformation is not for some heaven light years away, after we die. We may have to take the long view until the complete transformation comes to pass at the end of time -- a world where there is no crying and no pain and death has died -- but there are plenty of things we can do in the short term. If God isn't going to destroy creation, we shouldn't be doing that either: we can respect the air and the water and the plants and animals, but especially the people whom God created and Jesus died to save. The work of transformation is difficult enough without us working against God's purposes. Revelation 21 tells us that Christ is the Alpha and the Omega: the beginning and the end of all things. Even if we don't cooperate with this long view of the end of time, Christ is still going to win. We have the opportunity to be part of that transformation of ourselves and our world, to help to hasten the coming of heaven to earth.

This morning we will have the service of anointing for those who wish to have oil put on their foreheads in the sign of the cross. This is a sign of the Spirit's presence for strengthening of faith, forgiveness of sins, and the healing of body, mind, and spirit. I know that friends among us who are preparing for surgery tomorrow would value your prayers and that healing. I know that families who are grieving the loss of loved ones have been strengthened by your prayers and

support. The prayers of the faithful have the power to bring peace and comfort and transform situations which may be anxious or overwhelming. Please come forward as you are able during the final hymn, and hold these brothers and sisters in your prayers in the coming week.