

Pastor's Message – 5/22/2022
Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5
Acts 16:9-13a

That night Paul had a vision. We're a culture that is attached to intellect and what we can see and touch. We're skeptical of visions. We're not inclined toward valuing a deeper wisdom, the knowing of the heart, as opposed to the knowing of the grey matter. But we still long for vision – something beyond what we can see.

Sometimes we look around. Sometimes we look inside. Sometimes we look beyond sight. This past Tuesday, the Elizabeth Circle had a long program and talked about angels. We long to wonder why and move beyond the hurts and trials and questions of today. We long either for the misty past when skies were bluer, grass was greener, or the sun was warmer. Or we long for a future still unseen and unrealized. This is the stuff of vision.

Looking back is sometimes the essence of our dreams and our vision of how things should be – the way they have been. Our memories of yesterdays become our vision of tomorrow. And so, the Book of Revelation gives us a vision of tomorrow.

But getting to tomorrow can be a difficult proposition. Of course, that's always been true, especially when "tomorrow" refers to a better time when the problems of today are resolved. In biblical terms, tomorrow — the future, the time that has not yet arrived — is the assurance that *the present is never the end of the story*. It proclaims that the darkness of today will not survive into tomorrow.

Tomorrow is the stuff of prophecy. "The days are coming ..." proclaimed the prophets. Such prophecies were often uttered during dark and dismal days in Israel's history when not only the present but also the future looked bleak. But "tomorrow" was one way the prophets kept Israel's faith alive.

Tomorrow is one of the keys for understanding Christianity, too. We explain it something like this: When you embrace the way of Christ, you enter the kingdom of God, which is already here in some ways. But you also inherit the hope of the kingdom to come, where God's love and power will have full sway, where all wrongs will be righted and where there will be neither sorrow nor suffering anymore.

Today's reading from Revelation is typical of such biblical thought. The day is coming, says the Lord, when there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, "for the first things have passed away."

We most often hear about Christianity's view of tomorrow when we are personally facing sorrow or pain that seems insolvable. "Don't lose hope," we say. "There is a better world coming." "In the end, nothing can separate us from the love of God." "Tomorrow — some distant tomorrow — you will see your loved one again." "Tomorrow there will be war no more." "Tomorrow all violence will cease, and people will live peaceably with their neighbors." And so on.

In one way, the 20th century scared off the church from putting too much stock in earthbound tomorrows. As the 19th century drew to a close, many liberal Protestants looked ahead with hope and optimism, believing that our world was making progress toward becoming a more just society. Those Christians had an enlarged vision of what

following Jesus meant. They no longer limited their work to soul-saving but were active in society as well, taking on such problems as poverty, warfare, injustice, and other human ills. They saw themselves as helping to establish a new social order that would be a place of peace, justice, and well-being — the sort of things we expect in the kingdom of God. Some people went so far as to say the world was about to enter a century that would be Christianity's own.

But two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and other 20th-century happenings eventually convinced many who touted this "Social Gospel" that they weren't about to see the dawn of the earth's version of the kingdom of heaven after all. The movement died out. Continued violence and division, war, and political fighting of today can lead us to look for a future. The horrors of war in Ukraine and a worldwide pandemic, mass shootings and racial targeting, the table of unity cracking in the United Methodist Church and ethical and moral issues of abortion and women's rights. If only the vision of a new heaven and a new earth would finally come.

The Book of Revelation lays out a vision for us that when the kingdom of God finally arrives, it will be because *God* has acted to make it so. The new Jerusalem will come down from God out of heaven. Our world won't evolve into the new heaven and the new earth on its own or by our doing.

What this all suggests is that *we* cannot expect to establish the kingdom of God; that will be God's doing. But *neither should we assume we can have no responsibility for the course of society*. Just because we cannot change everything is no reason to think it's a wasted effort to change some things or at least try to. Followers of Jesus can and should have a positive impact on the tomorrows of our world.

Christians can call this work "finding tomorrow." One part of the concept is focused on ourselves and our local context, with the idea that we should form our own community as a model for the world of how God wants people to live together. But the other part is outward-looking. It means we aren't responsible only for creating a model society among ourselves but also have some responsibility for the whole society's welfare.

It is the kingdom of God which is the ultimate tomorrow. It's the goal of history and the reward of the faithful. Its coming is up to God. But between today and that tomorrow are the nearer tomorrows. Those who follow Jesus have the duty to make sure that the doors of justice and society's benefits are open for all for those tomorrows and that the path to spiritual fulfillment is well marked.

Perhaps one of your children or grandchildren has perplexed you with this question. Perhaps you have asked yourself the same question, unable to find a satisfactory answer. "Is there really a heaven? And if so, where is it?"

So, what is heaven like? People in white choir robes lolling around on cottony clouds, plucking on harps? That's the iconic image of the newspaper cartoons -- based, in part, on the dreamlike visions of the book of Revelation, all thrown together randomly. Or, maybe it's a gleaming, celestial city, whose streets are paved with gold. (That comes from Revelation, too.) The prophet Isaiah seems to think heaven is a great banqueting-table, groaning with food and wine: a sumptuous feast spread out upon a mountaintop. The Vikings would have

liked that one well enough: Their image of heaven was a vast, smoky mead-hall, with joints of mutton forever turning on spits over the fire, and drinking-horns that never run dry.

From the beginnings of history, human beings have tried to speculate about the nature of this place called "heaven" (if, indeed, it's even a place at all.) Yet, no matter how creative the vision, in everyone there's something lacking, something impossible to define, the object of our deepest longing, and the expression of our most profound hopes.

Our reading from the Book of Revelation and, indeed, the whole of the Book of Revelation is a reminder of the great hope in which we live as Christians. That hope is the confidence that no matter –

- what in our life goes to the weeds of disappointment,
- what in our life gets overrun by the crabgrass of unfulfilled dreams,
- what in our life is undermined by the moles and voles of sins and mistakes ...

God will, on the timetable of eternity, restore all that has been lost.

So, where is heaven? Heaven is where the waters of baptism are poured and the name of God is spoken. Heaven is where the body and blood of Jesus are offered in bread and wine. Heaven is where the guilty are released from their deadly past through the granting of forgiveness. Heaven is where the stranglehold of death and hopelessness is broken. When enemies embrace, when neighbors are neighborly, when victims refuse to get even, when the powerful offer to serve instead of demanding that they be served, when we give up a "me-first" attitude, there is heaven.

With God's help and by the grace of God, God's Book of Revelation vision can become more and more a reality. The light of God can shine through us. Some may possess the ability, time, and opportunity to take more active roles. Every project and movement needs leaders and some of us will function in this capacity. We may lobby to keep Christ's presence in our ever-more secularized society. We may be frontline soldiers in some campaign to bring the light of Christ to individuals, groups, or institutions that live in darkness.

While some may bring the light in more overt ways, most of us are not in positions for such active means, but this in no way means that we are less responsible. Our witness to be champions and disciples of the light is critically important. When we present a positive and happy attitude, making every effort to smile and be friendly in our associations with others, we bring the light. We have the opportunity to avoid the tendency to allow the pressures and problems of contemporary society to prevent the light from shining through us. Bringing the light of Christ is the responsibility of all, regardless of our status in life, our age, or what we do for a living.

The new Jerusalem has already come down from God out of heaven and followers of Jesus have the privilege of taking up the torch to shine for a world of darkness which does not believe in God's possible. In God's possible, the curse is ended, God's presence is felt, Jesus' face is seen, and the voice of the Holy Spirit is heard. In God's possible, there will be no night—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. In God's possible, tomorrow becomes today.

As we long for the quiet center we can have a vision and hear the voice of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit calling us and leading us to a different place.

Paul had a vision. This isn't unusual for Paul. In the verses just preceding our story today, the Holy Spirit changed Paul's travel plans not once, but twice. He had planned to go east, but now he's been inspired to go west. Paul has a vision or dream of a man from Macedonia calling him to come help the people there. In response to this, Paul led his traveling companions on a journey that ended in Philippi.

In the middle of his journey, in spite of his plans, God called Paul to a different course. Paul heard that call and answered it. That same call comes to every one of us. God calls us, invites us to come to Him, to know and receive His blessings and to change our course to the one that God calls us to. We are called to "turn [y]our eyes upon Jesus" ... and "the things of earth will look strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." That call can happen at any time – anywhere.

Sometimes God's call is to stay on course. Sometimes it's to change course if the Spirit begins blowing in another direction. But that can be scary stuff. God shows us the river, but we have to gather there and be prepared to cross to get to the other side. But, sometimes, I would rather not even be on the boat. Period.

Getting on a boat means separation. We pull away from the harbor and feel alone.

Getting on a boat exposes us to vulnerability. The ocean is so vast; the boat is so small. The dangers are many.

Getting on a boat limits my options. Where can you go on a boat and what is there to do on a boat?

Getting on a boat begs the question: When will I be on land again? We were born to live on land!

These are the kinds of responses Moses, Jeremiah and others in the Bible had to God's call to get on board.

We need to have the winds of God's Spirit in our sails. But more than that, we need to get on the boat. And that, for me, and I suspect for you, means a small dying -- a dying to the pain of separation, a dying to the chill of vulnerability, a dying to limited options and a dying to whether we'll ever see land again. The apostle Paul, who himself was shipwrecked three times, said as much in his first letter to the Corinthians: "I die every day!" (15:31).

Responding to God's call, changing course to where the Holy Spirit leads, coming to baptism mean a change in what we may have been doing. Putting out into the seas of service with the winds of the Spirit in our sails, however, offers a gift of life!

There is a river of water that runs through the new heaven and new earth of God and there are blessings from that river of life. The Book of Revelation tells us that in the garden of God's new world there is a life-giving river;

there's a tree of life;

it's a place where one can see God face to face;

there is no death.

All of this matches the Eden of which Revelation speaks. In Eden, a river flowed to Water that grew there. A tree of life grows there.