

“A New Heaven and A New Earth”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
June 30, 2019

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 146:1-7

New Testament Lesson: Revelation 21:1-6

In his book, *Revelation for Everyone*, theologian N.T. Wright says, “So many Christians have read John’s book (of Revelation) expecting that the final scene will be a picture of ‘heaven,’ (and in doing so) they fail ... to see the full glory of what he is saying.” “It isn’t a matter ... of ‘heaven’ being the perfect world to which we shall ... go one day, and ‘earth’ being the shabby, second-rate temporary dwelling from which we shall be glad to depart”

The Bible depicts ‘earth’ as “a glorious part of God’s ... creation, and ‘heaven,’ though (it is) God’s own (dwelling place), is also the place where the ‘sea’ stands as a reminder of the power of evil, so much so,” says Wright, “that at one point there (was) ‘war in heaven.’ God’s two-level world needs renewing in both its (places)” – heaven and earth. “... When that is done, we are left not with a new heaven only, but a new heaven and a new earth – and they are joined together completely and forever.”

Do we ever think of heaven as a work in progress? Not really. And yet it says right here in Revelation that “the first heaven and the first earth (will pass) away, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

Somehow heaven and earth are connected in such a way that both will be a new creation in the fullness of time, at the second coming of Jesus, when God’s plan and purpose are fully realized.

So what about us in the meantime? Jesus talked a lot more about how to live here on earth than he did about looking forward to being in heaven. For Jesus, it was always about the Kingdom of God among us, and not some far off place to look forward to.

It’s like the two old men who have been best friends for years. Both live to their early 90s when one of them suddenly falls deathly ill. His friend visits him on his deathbed and says, “Listen, when you die, do me a favor. I want to know if there’s baseball in heaven.” The dying man says, “We’ve been friends for a lifetime, so yes, I’ll do this for you.” And then he dies.

A few days later, the surviving friend is sleeping, when he hears his friend's voice. "I've got some good news and some bad news," it says. "The good news is: there's baseball in heaven." The bad news? "You're pitching on Wednesday."

No. Heaven is not some far off place that we should spend our lives longing for. Heaven is God's joyous creation, to which our earthly existence is forever bound, so much so that both will be created new in the fullness of time.

In the Apostle John's Book of Revelation we get some insights into how this new heaven and new earth are to come about, and how we can participate in its creation. The first thing we are told in our reading today is that "the holy city, the new Jerusalem (will come) down out of heaven from God."

God is bringing our future, heavenly home to us. It's not a return to the Garden of Eden; it's a holy city, the center of our lives and community, together with God and one another. If we envision heaven as a garden, clearly that honors God's act of redemption, restoring everything to the way God intended it. But that's not the vision we have here. No. We have a vision of a new city, and that vision honors not only God, but also our role in God's plan and purpose.

From the very beginning, God made us to be city builders, commanding us to "be fruitful and multiply, ... (to) fill the earth and subdue it; ... (to) have dominion." A new heaven and a new earth as a holy city is God's way of saying humanity is still "very good" (Genesis 1:31). God is saying that what we create can be good. In God's grand plan, things are moving ahead to what is new and not just back to what was old. And we partner with God in ushering it in. As we bring order to the world around us, we as city builders contribute to the New Jerusalem.¹

Of course, the type of cities we build should be a reflection of God's plan and purpose. And so far, we've not always done a very good job of it, have we? Why are our cities, towns, villages and even our families not places of heavenly beauty, divine love, everlasting peace and reconciliation?

Well, it's because we're using our blueprints instead of God's when it comes to city building, as we fashion our communities, structure our governments, and relate to other people on all levels, families, friends, communities and nations.

¹ **Bob Kaylor, Homiletics Online Senior Writer and Senior Minister of the Park City United Methodist Church in Park City, Utah**

God's blueprint doesn't have anything to do with class warfare – rich vs. poor; nothing to do with nationalism – going to war with other countries; nothing to do with peer pressure, bullying, sibling rivalry or family fallouts. No. In John's Revelation of what's to come, we will be united – not in our own socio-economic class, not in our political viewpoints, not in our family factions – but rather, we will be united in God. We “will be his people,” says John, “and God himself will be with (us).” In the presence of God, in the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, we are not our own person. We belong to God.

And so it is today. For those who seek to live in unity with God and one another, for those who celebrate and maintain a holy connection with God and their fellow human beings, for those who honor and respect creation, we belong to God and not to our whims and desires, our weaknesses and temptations, our power and ambition.

And the Good News is we need not wait for the new heaven and the new earth to enjoy the blessings of God. God has given us the ability and the calling to live today as if the new heaven and the new earth have already arrived. We are called to create and maintain sacred, holy and blessed connections with God and one another – and with all creation.

That's what we strive to do here at First Church – create and maintain a place where people gather for sacred, holy and blessed activities with one another, and with God; a place where we can experience God's presence all around us and take that experience of God out into a world of need. God is here with us, uniting us in the beauty of this sanctuary, in the prayers and music lifted up here, in the love and fellowship of our Passing of the Peace, in the scripture and proclamation that is offered, in celebration and fellowship after worship, and in the learning and guidance of Sunday school beforehand, and of course, in putting our heads and hearts and hands to work in the world around us, on behalf of Jesus.

A little bit of heaven right here on earth. That is how we participate in city building in keeping with the Spirit of God. We can and do glimpse the new heaven and the new earth all around us, the new heaven and the new earth that God is even now creating through us and with us, a new creation through which, John assures us, God “will wipe every tear from (our) eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more....” “It is done!” declares Jesus. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

Water as a gift for those who are thirsty, all that we need in life given as a gift from God – not through war and conquest, not through struggle and physical labor, not through money or stealing, but as a gift from God.

Know and believe that God has given you and everyone on earth all that we could need and it's up to us to live into that vision. In our faith in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, let us all find the freedom to set aside our warring ways, our competitive instincts, our prideful attitudes, and instead go about our business of city building – of ordering God's good creation – in the Spirit of God's new heaven and new earth. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Living God, give us faith to be sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we see only through a glimpse of faith.

Help us to believe that you are our God, and that you bless those who truly seek you.

Make us bold in the certainty that we are able to please you and confident that we will attain all that you have promised, to your glory.

We thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness throughout all the generations, a faithfulness honored and celebrated in the families you have brought together.

We ask your continued blessing and protection on all the families we know and love.

We pray, too, for all those suffering physical, emotional, spiritual and material difficulty and pain.

We pray all this in the promise and power of the Holy Spirit and using the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**