

## Season after Pentecost

September 3, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 16:20-22; Revelation 21:1-6;22:1-5

*Grace to you and peace from God - who was and is and is to come. Amen*

What is heaven going to be like? Someone asked a number of children for their opinions. You might find them interesting:

- Eric, eight years old, said, "Heaven is a place where there is a lot of money lying around. You could just pick it up, play with it, and buy things. I think I am going to buy a basketball and I am going to play basketball with my great-great-grandmother."
- Scott said, "Heaven is up in the sky, and you could look down at circuses for free if you want to, except you have to ask God for permission first."
- Tommy said, "I know what heaven is, but I don't want to go there. I want to go to Disneyland."
- When mischievous Billy got was asked how he would get into heaven, he said, "Well, I'll just run in and out and keep slamming the door until they say, 'For goodness' sake, either come in or stay out.' Then I'll go in."

When we finally arrive at the conclusion of book of *Revelation*, John holds up a vision of a "new heaven and a new earth." It is not a blue print for heaven. It does envision something that is just the opposite of the first heaven and the first earth being experienced by those first Christians under Roman domination... it is just the opposite of the first heaven and first earth that has come to be as humans chose "to glorify all the wrong stuff:" war; greed; supremacy; humiliating our adversaries; shaming those who differ from us; ignoring or neglecting our children, families, the poor; consuming goods that possess us rather than us possessing them; going through the motions of our religion rather than genuinely seeking to listen carefully and prayerfully to God.<sup>1</sup>

As *Revelation* concludes, John holds up God's goals for redeeming all creation. It's really not a picture of heaven but a glimpse into what God IS doing and WILL accomplish. It is a vision of how this world could and will be under the loving, powerful, graceful, non-violent reign and rule of God. And it is glorious, isn't it. The Enthroned One and the Lamb come down to dwell with us. God will wipe away

the tears of sorrow. No more death, mourning or pain. Later in chapter 21, it is noted that there is no need for a Temple for God is right there and the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed but accessible to all nations. The river of the water of life flows from God for all to drink. The tree of life provides food for each month and its leaves will be for the healing of the nations. No more war, injustice or violence. No more division or hatred among ethnic groups, religious bodies or nations. This is what God wants for us. This is what God WILL accomplish.

It IS a glorious picture that has inspired artist, musicians, writers and believers. For those first listeners, it was meant to offer a very sharp contrast to the way things were under the Roman Empire that battled to conquer the earth and to make all peoples, systems and resources serve and maintain it. God's ways and intent were not like Rome's. "The heart of the message of Revelation is not that God plans to destroy our world, but that God's desire is to heal."<sup>2</sup> Which brings us to this other important, challenging truth. "This vision of God's life-giving creation is a vision not just for our future, but for the present. *Revelation* calls upon people to live as citizens of God's New Jerusalem even now, right in the heart of empire. These glimpses of [God's] renewed creation can inspire and motivate us to undertake the exodus journey out of the unsustainable ways of the empire to live as citizens of God's renewed world."<sup>3</sup>

The new, beautiful city of God is not just about when we die, as important as that promise is. "This vision [in *Revelation*] is about ... a life that basks in God's presence *now*, a life that keeps God's commandment to love one another and mirrors God's glory today and every day.. In the midst of our anxiety, fear and hopelessness, our dreams for a future with God breaks into the present,"<sup>4</sup> empowering us to live and lift up God's ways of kindness, love, hope and justice now, to be God's partner in healing the world NOW. When preaching on this text Martin Luther King Jr said:

"It's alright to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey.' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

“In *Revelation 21* we read about John’s vision of the new heavens and the new earth. It is a powerful vision of future joy, beauty, and triumph as everything bad is removed from existence and replaced by goodness and light emanating from God and Jesus himself. The Message [Bible Translation] translates verse 3 as “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!”<sup>5</sup> I like that so much. God descending in the New Jerusalem — the new New York, the new Baltimore, the new Philadelphia, the new Hagerstown, the new Charleston — to live with us. “God has moved into the neighborhood.” Listen as Michael Middaugh ponders this,

“I thought; just imagine if God really did move into the neighborhood, a couple houses down. And then over time, God got to work fixing up everything broken or in disrepair. First, he starts pulling up weeds in the neighbor’s yard. Oh look, he’s putting in some roses. The next day he’s out across the street at that house in need of fresh paint. God’s on it, good as new in no time flat. And what’s he up to now? You hear he’s helping some of the neighbors with their taxes, and a good thing since the deadline’s already passed. But then, God tells you he’ll be at your house tomorrow, he’s seen a few things needing attention.

“Before long the entire block has been transformed, you can’t remember it ever looking so good. And God didn’t stop with just yard-work. Last weekend God threw a party. The whole neighborhood was there – everyone talking about how great it was, now that God had moved in next door. And you got to meet some new people, found out you had so much in common. Everyone had such a good time together; they were busy making plans for the future. A new book club was forming, and a men’s group, others had worked out a schedule to bring the Bryant’s food after their new baby girl arrived. How good it would be if God moved in a couple houses down.

“This is the vision of our future. God will make his dwelling place with humankind. He will be with his people – every tear wiped away. No more death, no more crying, no more pain.

“But God isn’t just waiting for the future. He has in mind to begin this work now. God’s Spirit lives within us, and each Sunday Jesus Christ our Lord comes into us in bread and wine. God invites

us to be his people, fixing up everything broken and in disrepair. Our work now accomplishes this plan, bringing order and good into the world. And we are called to care for others, with a generosity that is bold, seeing needs and meeting them, saying that it is God who has sent us, God's mission that we serve. And then they will say, "How great it would be if God's people moved in, a couple houses down."<sup>6</sup>

"To live in anticipation of New Jerusalem is to embrace its way of life and to bear witness to"<sup>7</sup> God who has moved into our hearts and lives. "How great it would be if God's people moved in, a couple houses down." To God be the glory forever and ever and NOW! Amen

Linda M Alessandri 9/2/17

## ENDNOTE

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1. Adapted from a paragraph in Dr. Jan Love's sermon, "The Grace of the City of God" May 9, 2010 as posted on day1.org.
  2. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today Horizon Bible Study, Volume 23, number 3, 2010 Horizons Presbyterian Women, Inc. P. 75
  3. Barbara Rossing, Journey Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today Horizon Bible Study, Volume 23, number 3, 2010 Horizons Presbyterian Women, Inc. P. 75
  4. Dr. Jan Love's sermon, "The Grace of the City of God" May 9, 2010 as posted on day1.org.
  5. Michael Middaugh, "When God Moves in Next Door." May 4, 2016 as posted on as posted on <http://perissosblog.org/when-god-moves-in-next-door/>
  6. Michael Middaugh, "When God Moves in Next Door." May 4, 2016 as posted on as posted on <http://perissosblog.org/when-god-moves-in-next-door/>
  7. Craig R. Koester, "Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6; 22: 1-5" as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).