

**The Already, Not Yet Church –
The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World¹
Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-5
First Presbyterian Church
April 10, 2022**

Intro to the Readings

A preacher once said, “You know, when it comes to the book of Revelation, there are two types of Christians – there are those who really like it... and those who are afraid of those who really like it. Well, I happen to be one of those who really like it... and for two reasons. First, because I know that Revelation is intended NOT to frighten, but to strengthen our faith and encourage our perseverance. And I am all for that! I need that! And second, I like Revelation because everything the Bible says about the future is meant to help us live more faithfully in the present. And that is what this Sixth Great End of the Church is about – how our vision and hope for the future impacts how we live in the present.

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Sermon

Though we certainly cannot draw a direct line between what’s happening here in Christ’s revelation to the Apostle John and the absolutely awful images coming out of Ukraine this week, to me the connection is clear. The revelation to John describes horrific times filled with great persecution, bloody battles, and unimaginable suffering.

¹ For this sermon, I depend heavily on “Living under Heaven,” a sermon by M. Craig Barnes, published in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph D. Small, edit. (Geneva, 2010), p.147-151.

And in fact, these were the conditions of life for many Christians in the first century church... because just as the Ukrainian people have been ravaged by Putin's Russian forces, Jerusalem had been devastated by Rome... and the early Christians were experiencing great tribulation and martyrdom. The Emperors Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian could all compete for the title of "Antichrist."

And the thing is that ALL of this suffering... ALL of this heartache that John and his church experienced - it flew in the face of their great hope in Jesus' great promise that he would soon return and establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. You see, during his ministry, Jesus had nurtured a passion for his kingdom in their hearts... he had promised to come back and make their dreams come true... yet by now a generation had passed... and things had become quite difficult for the church. And with their world coming to an end, the first readers of John's vision were sure this was the time that Christ and his kingdom would soon come.

Well, over the past two thousand years, scarcely a generation has passed without someone noticing how harsh the world has become and saying, "This is it! This is the end. Surely Jesus is coming soon." Twentieth century genocides gave us modern examples of antichrists... the invention of nuclear weapons threatened a fiery Armageddon... the Cold War evoked the language of evil empires... and even when the calendar flipped over to the year 2000, folks were sure that the world was ending. The thing is - the world is always coming to an end. At least that's what church historian Martin Marty has said. The world is always coming to an end - the first century came to an end... the 20th century came to an end... and when you think about it, so does your world come to an end when someone you love dies... or when divorce or illness drastically changes the course of your life... even when you retire and must say goodbye to people you dearly love, your world comes to an end.

And when that happens, what you most want to believe is that THIS end is not THE end. You want to believe there is something else beyond the life we know... you want to believe this end is not the end... you want to believe in the kingdom of Heaven.

Over the years, I have been asked, "What is heaven like?" Well, not having been there, I don't really know whether there are pearly gates or streets of gold or azalea-lined golf courses or sun-drenched beaches with beautiful sunsets... and frankly, the Bible doesn't say much on this one. What the Bible DOES say is that heaven exists... that it is real... and that it's real BECAUSE of Jesus Christ. Here's what I mean... just a few verses later in Revelation 22, the angel sent by Jesus to John says of Christ, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."² In other words, there is no time outside of Jesus' time... no space outside of his space... there is no time or place where Jesus is not... and what this means is that when you get to any of the "endings" in this life, you are not at the end. And even when you get to the end of your life, you are not at the end... because Jesus, who is not bound by our little span of life, is there waiting on the other side of death with eternal life.

² Revelation 22:13

Toward the end of his vision, John makes clear that the home of God will be among mortals... that God will dwell with them as their God, and they will be his peoples... he will wipe every tear from their eyes.... death will be no more... mourning and crying and pain will be no more... Nothing accursed will be there... and there will be no more night. Friends, that's how John says the story ends... and when by faith you know that's how the story ends, it can change your perspective on the story you are living today. This is John's whole point – if you believe that heaven is waiting up ahead for you, that heaven is for real... then you are free to live under heaven every day of your life.

No doubt you've heard that old saying, "Some Christians are so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good." And we know that they mean. Well, this sixth and final "great end of the church" calls us to be SO heavenly-minded that we live it... that we exhibit it on earth. In fact, when you think about it, we have nothing good to offer our world without a vision of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Pastor and Seminary president, Craig Barnes, makes an interesting connection. He says that when you read church history, you discover that the people who did the most good for this present world are the ones who believed most strongly in the world to come. This was true of the apostles who sought the conversion of the Roman Empire, the architects of the City of God that inspired society for a thousand years, the English pietists who abolished the slave trade, the African American preacher who gave the twentieth century a dream of a color-blind society, the nun in Calcutta who taught us to treat the dying with dignity... and the list... it goes on and on. Where did they find their vision for life in this world? It came from everything Jesus taught us about the Kingdom of Heaven.³ They embodied this sixth Great End of the Church... they exhibited the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. And you know what? With God's help, so can I. So can you.

³ Barnes, p.150