

Revelation 21: 1-6 “God is Coming Home” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/26/19

The final book in the Bible has gotten a bad rap, if you ask me. Hal Lindsey and former Disciples of Christ member Kirk Cameron, sorry to say, have created lies about the Apocalypse through the Left Behind series. Other folks ignore the book, wondering why such an odd composition was even included in the biblical library? It strikes them as a cross between Jon Stewart’s Daily Show and a Stephen King novel. Those who are obsessed with it believe it is a coded “history of the future,” telling us how the world will end as folks look forward to abandoning this world for another. Such a way of reading Revelation is based on a lot of assumptions which deserve to be questioned. Such as, did God create a closed and predetermined universe, or is it a free and participatory one? Is humanity’s future like a movie that has already been shot and we are just watching it play out? Or is the future open, inviting us to not simply resign ourselves and adapt, but to be inventive and helpful to create the outcome as God’s coworkers and fellow actors?

For those of us who have left behind that “roadmap to the future” approach, we are rediscovering this book in a fresh way. The first step to doing so is to put Revelation back in its historical context. The very best scholars agree it was written during the bloody reign of either Nero in the AD 60s or Domitian in the AD 90s. Try to imagine a time when most of the wealth of the country was in the hands of 1.5% of the population. Try to imagine that for the lower 98.5%, life was precarious as they lived in situations which produced tears, mourning, crying, pain and death. Life was hard for the poor, the disabled, the immigrant, the outcast. Even more, life was dangerous because the leader at the helm of the empire was vicious, paranoid, and insane, whether it was Nero or Domitian. In that society, what was worshipped was not God but winning. Rome literally worshipped Victory with a capital “V.” The Greek word is Nike,

the Latin is Victoria. The cult of Nike was reflected in temples, statues, coins and other representations. The goddess Nike didn't just give favor on the athletic fields but with its military conquest and intimidations. With such a goddess, the Romans not only glorified war but invested heavily in it over the care of its own citizens. Money was funneled to those who could manipulate truth in order to keep evil in power. Checks and balances were non-existent; there was no leadership that wasn't paid off by the one who held power in the palm of his hand. Nay-sayers were silenced in various ways, not the least of which was torture or death. Thus, the Romans could boast "we are winning" without hesitation. Romans expected others to follow suit, not just worshipping Victory but the madman on the throne, something followers of Jesus would never do! Can you imagine it?

Brian McLaren notes that under these circumstances the followers of Christ were certainly thinking something like, "Jesus has been gone now for decades. The world doesn't seem to be getting better, only worse. Maybe Jesus was wrong... maybe it's time to forget that "love your enemies" business and take matters into our own hands. Maybe we need to strap on a sword and fight for our future... Or maybe we just need to eat, drink, make a buck, and be merry, because tomorrow we might all be dead." In this light, Revelation was the opposite of some codebook but instead addressed the very crisis at hand for Christ's followers. Even if the leader of the nation is crazy, Revelation claimed, it's not the end of the world. Even if wars rage, it's not the end of the world. Even if peace-loving folks face death for their beliefs, it's not the end of the world. Even if the world as we know it comes to an end, that ending is also a new beginning. Whatever happens, God will be faithful and the way of Christ – a way of love, non-violence, compassion, and fervent dedication will triumph.

The book of Revelation became literature of and for the oppressed, a clever way of giving voice to the truth, when freedom of speech was dangerous in one way, and remaining silent was dangerous in another. Instead of saying, "The Emperor is a fraud and his regime cannot stand," which would get them arrested, Revelation tells a strange story about a monster who comes out of the sea and is defeated. Instead of saying, "the religious establishment is corrupt," Revelation tells a story about a prostitute. Instead of naming the current empire as being doomed, Revelation talks about a past empire, Babylon, that collapsed in failure. Understanding the book in such a way allows us to read it with fresh eyes and ponder what lessons it can teach us without diminishing its meaning to some codebook or prediction. You may have already experienced what dangers exist for humanity when we dare to read this book as some predetermined road map. If we believe that people actually get thrown into a lake of fire at the end of Revelation, then we see God as some kind of sadistic torturer. If God tortures for eternity, we might give ourselves a pass to participate in torture of others during our next war or political upheaval.

If we take the phrase, "the first heaven and first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more," literally some of us might just say "Hey, why worry about environmental destruction, overconsumption, or climate change? God is going to destroy the world anyway, so we might as well pitch in." Fire-nadoes, history breaking flooding, increasing average temperatures, and more devastating storms year to year are just the beginning of God's planned ending for our world. If this were true, then we would not have the next few verses of the text. The scripture tells us God comes home. "See the home of God is among mortals," the voice tells John. In other words, God didn't create this world for it to be destroyed as we get plucked off to some

magical planet far away. God's goal for the world is to come and hang out with us creatures on our turf, God's earth. Humanity, with our messy, fleshy, beautiful, problematic selves, shares the renewed earth with God. The text reveals our earth isn't leased to us on a short-term basis because God is moving in, forever our eternal, earthly roommate. Therefore, caring for the place which is not just our residence but God's is of vital importance in living out the love Jesus modelled for us.

The picture painted for us is as beautiful today as it was in the first century. A new city descends from heaven to Earth which is in direct contrast to the horrors of Rome. This city doesn't need a temple to worship Nike and the many other gods because the one True God's presence is everywhere. It doesn't need a sun or moon because the light of Christ illuminates it from within. We are told its gates are never shut, never closed, and it welcomes people all over the globe to receive the treasures offered as well as offer up their own treasures to be shared. From the center of the city, a river flows - a river of life or aliveness. Along its banks grows the Tree of Life. All of this, of course, reminds us of the original creation story in Genesis and echoes God's own words "Behold! I'm making all things new!" Revelation tells those early followers as it tells us that the story of God's work in history has never been about escaping Earth and going up to heaven. It has always been about God coming to dwell among us. Being faithful never meant waiting passively for a future that was already determined but it does mean participating with God in God's unfolding story. God has never been a distant, terrifying monster waiting for vengeance at the end of the universe. God has always been at work to be among us here and now, making the tree of true aliveness available for all. What was true for Revelation's original audience is true for us today. Whoever is in power, whatever chaos is

breaking out, whatever danger threatens, the river of life is flowing now. The Tree of Life is bearing fruit now. True aliveness is available now. That is why the very last word in Revelation ends with a single word echoing through the universe. That word is not Wait! Nor is it Not Yet! or Someday! It is a word of invitation, welcome, reception, hospitality, and possibility. It is a word not of ending, but of beginning. That one word is Come! The Spirit says it to us. We echo it back. Together with the Spirit, we say it to everyone who is willing. Come!