

“No More Sea”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
All Saints Day – 3 & 4 November 2018
Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

“And the sea was no more.” This simple phrase often gets lost in the strange, mysterious imagery and symbolism of The Revelation to John. We tend to focus on the more lurid scenes from John’s vision: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the shining grandeur of God’s heavenly court, the opening of the seven seals, and that fearsome lake of fire we all hope to avoid.

Some people spend their lives trying to decipher the hidden meaning of that bizarre story, looking for signs of the times so that they can predict and prepare for the long-awaited return of Jesus. Occasionally, someone even makes news by claiming to have unraveled the enigma. They set a date for the beginning of the end, only to suffer disappointment and confusion when that day passes and the world just keeps on twirling.

What people forget or ignore is that the more exotic elements of John’s vision defy human logic. Perhaps John did this on purpose. Writing at a time of increasing persecution of Christians, John may have encoded his vision to conceal the truth from the uninitiated, but it’s equally likely that the vision God gave John just cannot be fully expressed through human language. John did his best using symbols and images that transcend the limits of words alone, but even these are only indicative, not definitive. They offer a glimpse into God’s intentions, but complete understanding eludes us. What then can we learn from the Revelation?

Well, here’s what we know. John wrote to seven Christian communities in the western part of Asia Minor, present-day Turkey, and he encouraged them rather forcefully to keep the faith, despite their suffering. It appears that they had started to lose patience, wondering when

Jesus might return, and why he hadn't done so already. John's persistent message: not much longer; hang in there; because if you do, then the promise will be fulfilled, and if you don't, then the suffering you're experiencing now will seem luxurious compared to what you'll suffer if you give up.

And nobody looked forward to Jesus' return with more zeal than John. He wrote his revelatory vision as a letter to those seven communities, because he couldn't share it with them face to face. Persecuted for his faith, John had been exiled to the island of Patmos, separated from the people he loved most. No longer could he attend the raucous wedding festivals. No longer could he celebrate the baptism of a new convert, or comfort the grieving as they buried their dead. No, John was cut off, separated by this broad strip of water, and this is probably why, near the very end of his vision, John wrote, "And the sea was no more." I think this part of the vision might be God's personal gift to John, because to him, this was freedom and release, the agonizing separation of exile would cease.

Like the ancient Israelites escaping slavery in Egypt on dry land, the waters held back on both sides by God, John saw a day when the barrier that kept him hostage would disappear entirely, allowing him to walk across to the mainland and be reunited with those whom he loved. "And the sea was no more." This startling image pales in comparison to the many others contained in John's Revelation, but it is perhaps the most relevant for us, because we know the pain of separation in all its many forms, and we pray for the day when the barriers that keep us apart will disappear and allow us passage home.

Like John, all of us have suffered separation from those we love: spouses and children and parents waiting for the soldier or sailor or airman or marine deployed abroad to come home safely; rifts in families that shut down communication; parents and grandparents denied access to

their children and grandchildren; siblings who haven't spoken for years and can barely remember why; family and friends flung apart across the nation and around the world. Phones and Facetime help keep us connected, but you can't hug someone with technology.

And sometimes, it feels as if we've been separated from love itself: empty marriages bereft of joy, reduced to a dull rhythm of habit and co-habitation; relationships with family and friends devoid of real passion; isolation and exclusion from community, where our love is rejected and we are made to feel unlovable, especially in our world of strife; and above all, the same question that prompted John's circular letter, "Where is Jesus? Why isn't he here?"

Into the hollowness of our separation, the words of John echo, "And the sea was no more." That promise and the hope that it stokes within us may seem so distant and vague, especially when we want the suffering of separation to end now, but in our wiser moments we know that quick fixes to complicated problems are a fraud and easy answers to hard questions mean nothing. And we also know that while the completion of God's purpose will occur at an indeterminate future time, God does not wait for the big finale to work out his purposes here on Earth in our lives.

Nowhere do we find this more poignantly presented than in the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. Nowhere else is the sea of separation broader than between the living and the dead. It is a separation that lasts a lifetime for those left behind. Mary and Martha mourned deeply and doubly, because in addition to their grief over the loss of Lazarus, they also mourned the delay that kept Jesus from healing Lazarus and preventing his death. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." That's a statement of great faith, mingled with disappointment and perhaps even anger. Mary's pain moved Jesus to tears and action.

Without much drama, Jesus restored Lazarus to life, “And the sea was no more.” Sorrow became joy. Faith found vindication, and this miracle foreshadowed an even greater resurrection to come, when Jesus’ exodus from the tomb would open the way of everlasting life for everyone eager to receive it. The sea of sin no longer has the power to separate us from God, the great barrier replaced by the waters of baptism that lead us to a life that never dies.

Of course, we want what Jesus gave to Mary and Martha and Lazarus. We want the separation of death to be erased immediately and completely and permanently, but the miracle of resurrection life revealed through Jesus means that we can connect with those we have loved and lost. We believe that the dead have entered into newness of life. They dwell with God, and since God can dwell anywhere and everywhere, including within each of us, then those who have died are not as far from us as we might think. And while we might want more, it is enough as we wait for the day when our lives on this earth are over, “And the sea is no more,” and we are reunited with those who have gone on before, “on a farther shore, and in a different light.”

You know, there’s no indication anywhere that John ever escaped Patmos. In fact, he almost certainly died there, his sole lifeline to the seven sister churches that long letter he wrote, sharing what God revealed to him as best as he could. The sea that separated him didn’t dry up during his lifetime, and we still await the arrival of Jesus in glory. Yet John received a vision, and his legacy of hope has endured for all those who suffer separation. May we embrace that hope, in the midst of our suffering, and honor John’s counsel: hang in there; don’t give up, be patient; support each other. For as the Ancient One revealed, “these words are trustworthy and truth. See, I am making all things new.” Amen.