**“Shine Like the Stars”** by S. Finlan, at First Church, November 18, 2018

**Daniel 12:1–3**

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

**Revelation 21:1–4**

1 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; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he 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.”

What amazing readings! The Daniel passage is the one and only prophecy in the Old Testament that is unmistakably about the general resurrection of the dead. Scholars think that it was written during a time of persecution. It turns out that most of the texts on the afterlife were written during periods of persecution, when the Jews *needed* to hear something hopeful. And it is a scintillating passage, saying that the righteous shall awake to “everlasting life,” and they “shall shine . . . like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12:2–3).

Shining like stars is probably not literal, but is a way of stressing heavenliness (of course) and *everlastingness*.

This cycle of visions starts in Daniel chapter 10, where some kind of angelic figure with a “face like lightning” (10:6) makes pronouncements on the fates of the Persian and Macedonian empires, and of the Jewish people. The chief prince, Michael, is brought up in chapter 10. He appears to be a heavenly prince, and he is not called an angel. In chapter 12, Michael is called “the great prince, the protector of your people” (12:1).

The prophecy speaks of a time of tribulation, which I think would have resonated with its original audience. The author then moves straight into the resurrection. “Many” who sleep in the dust will be raised, the righteous to “everlasting life. . . . Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (12:2–3). This gives us two pieces of information about the righteous here on earth. They are wise, and they lead others into righteousness. So they are *studious*, and they are *evangelical*, if I may use that word. They are the spiritual teachers of the nation.

But they will be persecuted. Chapter 11 warns “The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder” (11:35). Scholars believe this is written during a time of great persecution by the Syrian emperor in 168 b.c., who tried to force the Jews to worship the Greek gods (G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, vol II, The Age of the Tannaim*: 281).My broader point is that the suffering of the righteous tends to give rise to hope for an afterlife. There is a burning *need* for justice or vindication, and it is at such a time that a revelation about the afterlife is given. God answers our deepest needs.

It had happened about a thousand years earlier, when the Book of Job was written. The Book of Job is really a stage play. It is a debate about why the innocent are made to suffer. The afterlife passages are very brief, but important. Job is written at a time when the afterlife concept was that everyone went down to the same gloomy place, Sheol, and just lay in the dust (Job 20:11; 40:13). At two points in the play, the character Job becomes very worked up, complaining of God judging and pursuing him (14:3; 19:22). In chapter 14 he visualizes God releasing him from Sheol, for “you would long for the work of your hands” (14:14–15). In chapter 19 he gets even more worked up about his suffering and his isolation (19:17), and then he counters that with an explosion of hope, “for I know that my Redeemer lives,” and “I shall see God” (19:25–26). The dual pressure of suffering and faith *opens* for him a vision of the afterlife, even though it goes against his culture’s belief system.

And our second reading today, Revelation, is definitely written during a time of suffering and persecution. The promise that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21:4) is what Christian readers really *needed* to hear. And *I* need to hear it, too. I think so often of those who have been edged out, bullied, or mistreated, or *killed* like many Protestants during the Reformation, or like some Christians today in Laos or Pakistan, or like Muslims in Burma. I trust that God will vindicate all the innocent and bring them into the eternal community of the righteous.

So it is during persecution that we often hear a message about vindication and rescue in the afterlife. But the promise is not just one of comfort and safety; it is also—and mainly—about continued growth. God, who has begun a good work in us, will complete it (Phil 1:6). That’s the whole point of everlasting life: *growth* and *purpose*, *love* and *learning*. There will be great joy in experiencing this. What passages like these do is they enable us to take some of that *future* joy and make it *present*!

There will be future disclosure of everything that was hidden, whether they are hidden crimes, or quiet deeds of goodness. There will be future justice, but we need to divest our concept of justice of any notion of revenge. Jesus has revealed the non-vengeful nature of God. He taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we are being God-like *if* we forgive (Matt 5:44-48), because *God* forgives—or *extends* forgiveness, though there are some who will never accept the offer, and will reject eternal life itself.

Rather than reward and punishment, God is all about growth and progress. *Evil* is not eternal, but goodness *is*. That which is sinful and incapable of growing has to die out, for “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23), as Paul says. This is not vengeance, although some believers think of it that way. It will take a long time for some to let go of the notion of divine vengeance, and God understands that about us.

But hear this—Revenge and cruelty have no place in God’s kingdom. Many human deeds will be recognized as contemptible, but no act of revenge can undo *any* of the evil that was done. No amount of violence against a perpetrator can bring back a *single* victim.

So our spiritual focus should be on growth, restoration, and life, and on that extraordinary idea that we can take some of the *future* joy and make it *present*! God will wipe away every tear. Sometimes *we* can wipe away a tear, too.