

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**May 19, 2019, The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

Psalm 148, Revelation 21: 1-6

### **THE PROMISE AND PROD OF THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH**

If I asked you when Easter is, I'm guessing that most of you would answer with the date of Easter Sunday. And you wouldn't be wrong, but you wouldn't be entirely correct either. For us as Christians, Easter is an entire season that stretches from Easter morning to Pentecost when we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming to the church. So, this year Easter or Eastertide as its known in churchy circles is from April 21<sup>st</sup> to June 9<sup>th</sup>.

We don't just have one day, but 50 days to continue to celebrate what it means that Jesus died on the cross for the world, and three days later rose to new life. This is the season that we celebrate what it means that Jesus has given us new life.

One of the passages that helps us celebrate in this season of Easter, is Revelation 21 and its promises of the new heaven and new earth that will one do come. Now the problem with Revelation is that is has confused people for years. But I'm going to ask you to spend a few minutes with Revelation 21 this morning because it offers us a powerful dose of hope and promise.

Here is the most basic thing to know about the book of Revelation. Even though it seems filled with confusing images and words, it is at its most basic, a book about the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

But Revelation is not really a book we can just take at face value. It helps to have a bit of background information before we dive in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter that we read from this morning.

1. This book of Revelation was written in the late first century A.D. to late first century Christians, in a very specific time in their history. First and foremost, we are reading about John's visions and letters he wrote to someone else, and God is able to speak to us through them. These are words written for a specific time in history.

a. Revelation was not written to forecast the future. It was not written with clues for us to decipher in 2019 and then line up those clues with world events today. It was instead a letter of hope written to people who needed to have the comfort that God was with them, and the power of Christ would ultimately win in spite of the chaos in their current lives.

Since chaos has continued throughout human history, the good news is that the book of Revelation has been able to speak to each new generation of Christians, including us.

But we mustn't separate it from its specific history.

2. Writing around 95 A.D. the writer John, was given a series of visions that were meant to give the young Christian church courage and comfort. God also gave him instructions to write to seven of the churches in modern day Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. The book of Revelation is the letter he wrote to them.

a. These Christians were living in the Roman Empire, and were being persecuted by Rome. 25 years before in 70 A.D. Roman armies had destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem. The Holy City and the House of God were in ruins. We need to remember that in these years the early Christian church saw themselves as a part of Judaism. The destruction of the city and the Temple were devastating to them.

b. The Christians had become the targets of horrendous violence and torture by Rome. These were the days of Christians being used in the Roman coliseums for sport. These were the days when Christians were made to confess their loyalty to the Roman Emperor, or die through torture for not confessing. Christians were burned at the stake, drawn and quartered, and used as human torches at Roman garden parties.

c. So, the author of Revelation, John, wanted to send the messages and visions of hope he had received from God to these suffering people. But he needed to disguise the message, so only they could understand it. So, he wrote in a coded language that was easily understood by the people who read and heard it, but not easily understood by the Romans.

Today, we know what some of the images mean, but not all of them.

One author I read this week said that the people would have understood the coded language in the same way that we understand when political cartoonists use elephants to represent Republicans and use donkeys to represent Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

The images used were a familiar part of the way they saw the world in the late first century.

All the images of monsters and beasts and lakes of fire and the Lamb, the New Jerusalem, and many images from the book of Genesis would have made perfect sense to people who received the letters from John then.

And with a bit of work this message of hope can be comforting to us too.

3. This book of hope can comfort us because here is the bottom-line message of the book of Revelation: Jesus Christ who died on the cross and was raised to new life on the third day is alive forever.

And Jesus Christ is more powerful than any chaos, or evil, or evil empire, or destructive force in their lives, or in our lives, and in the lives of all humanity who will follow after us.

Through Jesus Christ there is hope because God's love and healing will have the final word.

Those Christians in the first and second centuries were living in fear. Some of them were being killed and tortured by Rome. Into that setting John's visions from God and the letter he wrote gave them the strength to hold onto Jesus, no matter what happened.

The book of Revelation is a book for all who are fearful, or persecuted, or feeling lost and scared, or feeling overwhelmed by what is going on in the world around us.

It is a book for all us because it tells us over and over again that the power and love of the living Christ will always be with us.

And Jesus' love, power, peace, justice and grace will always have the final word.

In the passage we read this morning I want to focus on two of the coded symbols that John was given that brought hope then, and can bring hope to us as well. They are the image of the sea being no more and the image of God dwelling with us.

God gave John, and those first century Christians, and us, the picture of the end of earthly time when all will be new and healed and whole, including all of heaven and earth, and the gates of heaven will be open to all.

When heaven and earth become one, God says in 21:1 that the sea will be no more. I must confess I've never known what that meant until this week. I always thought this was some strange reference to the Sea of Galilee or the Mediterranean Sea. But it turns out I was wrong.

Throughout the book of Revelation there are many references to the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis begins with a swirling chaos of darkness with these words: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Into that watery chaos God created order by dividing the sea from the land, and then creating the sun, moon and stars, plants and animals and people.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament and in the thinking and mythology that surrounded the people of Jesus day and beyond, the sea continued to be a symbol of that chaos that was there before God created order and goodness. The sea was the place "out of which evil (such as the sea monster Leviathan and the dragon of Revelation) continually threatened to undo the goodness of God's creation. <sup>2</sup>

So now John, speaking for God, says that when heaven and earth become one, that sea of chaos won't even be there. In God's heaven there will be no chaos, or even the potential for chaos; there will be no sea.<sup>3</sup> There truly will be everlasting peace that will be uninterrupted for all eternity!

Imagine that you are an early Christian, and have seen the devastation of Rome's persecution. You have watched friends and family confess their faith in Jesus and be killed for it. You have seen loved ones tortured for their faith.

Then a letter comes to you, with God's promised vision of the day when chaos will be no more.

While our world is very different from those early Christians 2,000 years ago, we are also people who long for chaos to come to an end. We, with our own stories, know that longing for hope. When life feels just too overwhelming, when the news of our world, the news of our country, and especially the news of our family and friends overwhelms us and feels chaotic, we too long for hope and healing.

And then there is all that is going on in our own lives. Into that chaos that sometimes overwhelms our lives, we are also offered the promised hope that chaos will not have the final word.

Jesus will have the final word, and that final word and world is a place of healing and peace.

And when that happens God will live with us and we will live with God and we will be God's people. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

God really wanted those first people who read and heard the book of Revelation to understand the full extent of what this all meant. So, God gave John this vision:

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them; they will be God's peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;

God 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."

The word in our English translation says that God will “dwell” with us. When those New Testament Christians heard that word, to them it literally meant that God would pitch God’s tent with them.

These were people whose ancestors had been nomads and desert wanderers. These were people who were still affected by the history of Moses leading people across the desert to the Promised Land, when God went with them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God was with them, and through the Holy Spirit was with God’s people through all time, but when the new heaven and new earth come, God will move in with us, God will pitch a tent beside us, God will live with us and we will live with God.

If John’s Gospel was being written today, the author might have gotten us to understand this by saying: When heaven and earth become one and chaos is gone forever, God is going to move in next door. God is going to be in the apartment or duplex beside yours, the condo across the hall, the house beside yours.

God will be your closest neighbor; God will live in your neighborhood forever.

We live in a chaotic world, we live chaotic times, we often live chaotic lives. And into that world and into our lives comes the messages of hope in the book of Revelation.

While it is true that this message of hope is not going to take away the chaos in our world, our lives and the lives of those we love,

it is there as a continual reminder that we are not alone.

Chaos, change and devastation will not have the final word.

Jesus Christ is more powerful and more loving than any power that stands against him.

Jesus’ justice, love and healing will have the final word.

We are people who live on the other side of Easter morning, we have seen the empty tomb. While we hope for the day when heaven and earth are one, and the sea of chaos is no more, we can know that God is already tenting with us,

Jesus’ gift of new life is already a reality in our lives,

and God’s Holy Spirit is already living in our hearts.

Even when the nightly news says there is little reason for hope, even when the next phone call from a loved one breaks our heart, even when we are feeling overwhelmed and it feels like the sea of chaos is right outside our door, or we’re bobbing in the sea of chaos and are tired of swimming, the life of faith invites us to believe in a deeper reality than the chaos around us.

We are called to support and encourage each other to live and act as people who have a final hope that the day will come when:

chaos will end,

God will move into the neighborhood,

And God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

And death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Let us encourage each other with these promises.

Because they are our truth and our Good News! Amen and Amen!

1 The New Interpreter’s Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 2212

2 see: Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 464.1. 2 and: Pilch, John J., The Cultural World of the Apostles, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 68.

3 see: Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of the Apostles, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 68.