

“All Things New”

May 15, 2022

Revelation Song series – Graduation Sunday

These words might be the most familiar of any in the Book of Revelation. I've read this passage at many funerals as a message of comfort and hope for grieving families. And if we remember that John is writing to early Christians who stand in desperate need of hope as they experience persecution and struggle to keep their faith in Jesus Christ, these words would be received with thankfulness. This is the meaningful end that people were waiting for - this promise of life with God. That's why they were going through what they were going through - because they believed that God is faithful and would remain faithful.

But there's a lot behind these words. Hearing this promise at the end of Revelation and taking it all in makes it much more than just a promise of heaven as we might anticipate it. Remember that this is the Revelation of Jesus given to John the Seer. John shares the vision he's received from God - anchored in a time (the end of the first century AD) and place (modern-day Turkey) and for a group of seven churches. Much of what John writes to these churches is based in Old Testament stories like the Exodus and prophets like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah. The connections matter, and knowing those connections matters.

You might wonder why we're jumping from chapter 7 to chapter 21 because there's a lot in-between. And it's worth looking at the resources we've shared to gain better understanding. We talked about the seven seals, and there's also the sounding of seven trumpets and seven bowls - all of those images are a part of God's desire for justice against those who would oppress. There's the sounding of seven trumpets that brings destruction, images of a red dragon and two beasts who work against God. Some scholars believe the beasts represent two parts of the empire: military might and the economic machine. Those continue to be a part of our lives, too, and both can become idols too easily.

There's the mark of the beast and a specific number 666. Have you ever avoided that number? There's the message of God's wrath to those who have the mark of the beast and the number. You can find lots of interpretations, but one lifts up the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, which is a prayerful profession of faith that was literally worn on the body – to love God and love neighbor.

The mark of the beast would be a figure of speech to warn against forgetting God's commands. Maybe we can also consider the mark of baptism - that we're claimed as God's beloved. There are also scholars who highlight the number 666 and its connection to talking about Nero and all those in power who persecuted the faithful.

There are seven plagues on those who follow the beast, the battle of Armageddon, which concerns those from every nation who follow the Lamb. Those who follow the Lamb suffer and bear witness to the Lamb. John offers visions of Jesus returning to bring God's judgment on evil and to bring justice. Ultimately, God's Kingdom comes through the witness of the church - those who follow and remain faithful to the Lamb without succumbing to the temptation to worship idols - the empire which is centered in power and greed. Maybe there's a word of conviction for us and where we put our trust.

That's a very quick tour to chapter 21. Take time to read through it and listen to the resources that we've shared in this series. Truthfully, Revelation is filled with confusing imagery, and so we need help to understand it and all of the references to the Old Testament. But all along, the issue at hand is one that John and his fellow believers face: will they stand firm in their faith even unto death, or will they worship the emperor and follow the empire?

John talks about Babylon. Scholars believe John used the name Babylon to describe Rome because Babylon represented evil to those who were reading. Remember Israelite history - they had been taken into exile by the Babylonians. Babylon was the ultimate example of military power and might and the picture of the ultimate oppressor.

Living under the Roman Empire was similar. Will these Christians fall into worshiping the emperor, or will they stay true to God? Will they compromise their faith and fall into the culture around them? For John, the most terrible thing they could do was to turn away from God, and yet God doesn't force us to believe. We have the choice always whether to follow God or not, so that's the question John poses. Will early Christians continue to suffer persecution and be faithful witness?

Friends, this wonderful vision in chapter 21 comes right after the account of God's judgment of all people. I love these verses and could stay there - no more crying, mourning, or pain. If we read it only for comfort, then we ignore the sense of challenge and warning. Maybe that's easier, but God wants us to hear more than comfort. One writer says, "The vision confronts us not so much with relief that

everything will turn out well in the end but with the reality that things, here and now, are profoundly unwell and that repentance and change of life are required."

John calls us to look at ourselves and make an honest assessment. Where are we looking too much at ourselves and what we're able to do rather than looking at God and remembering God's greatness? Where in our lives are we worshiping other things — money and stuff, military might, technology, weapons and guns, and not God? Are we giving God glory, or are we trusting in our own abilities?

We have to take seriously God's justice - the reality that God sees us as we truly are with the struggles we have - if we want to claim this vision of God who makes all things new. And I'll be honest, I want this vision badly. This series has been planned for a long time, but after yesterday and the news of another shooting, I read this and prayed for God to make everything new because we are not okay.

It's not okay for that much hatred to be in someone's heart. It's not okay that we don't do more to end that kind of violence. So, I'm preaching to myself today for what needs to happen so that violence doesn't happen. No one should live in fear about shopping in a grocery store. Racism, hatred, white supremacy – it's not okay, and we have to stand against it as people of faith who believe that God loves everyone and that there's no group that's better than another.

I read the vision and want it to be a reality. There are many repeats from the vision in chapter 7 - springs of the water of life and no more tears. But in this vision, there is a new heaven and new earth - not just different, but altogether new. The old order has passed away.

This new heaven and new earth weren't a new idea for first-century people. The prophet Isaiah had talked about it at least 500 years before John did with the idea of the exiles returning home to Jerusalem from Babylon. Isaiah 65: 17 says, "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." Early followers of Jesus were ready for God to act on the promise even in their lifetime! Remember the urgency of Revelation – Jesus was coming soon. Their faith was urgent, and we've lost some of that urgency.

But the radical part of John's vision is that God will make a home **with** God's people. Belief in this time was that the universe was made up of different levels: the heavens, firmament, earth, and the region below. God presided in the heavens, so for God to make the move to earth is radical! For God to dwell on earth is an

incredible change in the order of things, and a sign of grace and peace after God's judgment.

John's vision is one where heaven and earth come together in a brand-new way. God is present with God's people in a brand-new way. God communes and communicates in a brand-new way. After all that's come before, after the struggle against evil, God will overcome it with good. And if there's something I need to hear, it's that God will overcome evil with good.

Author Kathleen Norris says that John's vision "is meant to give us the hope that, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, in the end it is good that will prevail. At the end of the Revelation to John we find justice restored, and a God who comes to be with those who have suffered the most in a cruel, unjust and violent world. A God who does not roar and strut like the ultimate dictator but who gently 'wipes away all tears from their eyes.'" Considering the horror, tragedy, death, and terror in our world, I need that message. Considering the horror, tragedy, and death that have been a part of John's vision in moments up until now, the promise of no more death, mourning, crying, or pain is most welcome.

As we've been reading through Revelation, there's that sense that John sees beyond the horizon that we're looking at. It's hard to see beyond what's in front of us today because it's such difficult stuff. John sees something of God beyond where we are, but it's a vision we want to claim and live into. It's the Kingdom of God. And even now, we can live into God's vision.

If we believe that God is the One who makes all things new, if we believe that God can transform this world into something better, then how do our lives reflect that kind of faith? Yes, we still face the reality of our humanity - death, mourning, crying, pain, and violence are still a reality. But how do we live so that those conditions don't control us? How do we loosen their grip on our lives and witness to God's power to make all things new – not ignoring the reality, but trusting, hoping, and working to bring God's Kingdom into reality?

Someone offered these questions to reflect on: "If death is no more, how can I live in ways I am now afraid to do? If mourning is no more, how will I serve differently, since there is nothing to lose? If pain is no more, how can I love in ways I had not dared to?" No more death, mourning, crying, pain – I want that vision right now. John's vision is ours to work toward.

Remember that John wrote to his fellow Christ followers to control their fear, renew their commitment, and sustain their vision in a time when all anyone could

see was cruelty, death, and hopelessness. John's visions offered hope, and we can find hope, too - and even find courage to walk with God who is working in us and through us and around us all the time.

It's not lost on me that we come to this powerful part of Scripture as we're celebrating with graduates today. We give thanks for their hard work. We pray for them as they step into a new phase of life. Perhaps we can relate to where they are: at a new place - perhaps with a vision that's still blurry, not quite clear, still coming into view. We put our hope into what they'll do, and if my child and those around her are any indication, then we can rest that God is at work in their lives - for justice, with passion and grace, wanting something better. That's for all of us as we work together for God's vision.

God hasn't given up. Even when we have so many questions about the evil in the world, God hasn't given up. This world matters to God, and we matter to God. Death and destruction don't win in the end. Violence, cynicism, hatred, oppression, and injustice will not last. Just when we think it's too late or all hope is lost, God is always doing a new thing. It's not just a platitude, but a call to participate!

Yes, we claim the promise of eternal life with God, but we also don't sit and wait for it passively. God doesn't work alone. God is all powerful and can do anything, but God doesn't work alone. God invites us to share in working for good - even when the situation seems utterly hopeless. No disaster can take away hope that is grounded in God, and we witness great hope and love in response to human struggles.

My hope and prayer are that we all hear the challenge and comfort from John - to keep on seeking God amid all of the other things that can pull us and claim us. John calls out a pattern in history - our human tendency to rely on ourselves and what we can win, get, and even take. But that stands in stark contrast to the way of Christ, the Lamb of God, whose victory came in sacrificial love. We're called to overcome evil with good - to be motivated by love and to trust that God is making all things new - even us.

God calls us to help, and I hope we'll help.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.