

Rev. 21:1 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. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

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.”

Rev. 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

THE HEAVENS ARE TELLING

The more I understand about the universe; the more I believe in God. The Bible put it this way, “The heavens are telling the glory of God.” (Psalm 19:1)

If you have friends that find it hard to believe in God, don't have them watch the religion channels on TV. Have them watch the science channel, especially those shows that talk about the formation of the universe and our earth. The universe is one amazing place. The heavens are truly telling the glory of God.

The universe is so big that our telescopes are literally looking back in time. The light from the stars that we see twinkling at night began their journey many years ago. In fact many of you saw those pictures from the Hubble telescope that gave us a view of stars being born soon after creation.

The universe was formless and void but then “bang” ... God filled it with light and life.

Not only is the universe amazing, but the little planet that we live on is amazing as well. It is billions of years old and began as a chunk of molten rock. Life did not exist on this planet for many years, and yet through an amazing chain of events the conditions that allowed for life to exist miraculously occurred.

The earth had to be tipped at just the right angle from the sun. We needed a moon to help regulate how the earth turns on its axis. We needed a big planet in our solar system like Jupiter

to take all the big meteorite hits. Many things needed to happen in order for life to exist on our planet.

And we have learned that creation is not a once and done thing. Our planet and our universe continue to change and develop as time goes by.

For example, on our own planet sometimes the climate gets colder or warmer. Occasionally a catastrophic event like a large meteorite can almost extinguish life and yet somehow life finds a way to survive. What seems like a terrible total disaster can, in the very long run, turn out to be yet just another chapter in the creation process. Creation is always going through re-creation.

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

When I think of these marvels I think of our lesson for today. Long ago (around 95 or 96 AD according to most scholars) a man named John received a vision of a “new heaven and new earth” for the “first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”

The people to whom John wrote were going through tumultuous times. In fact the earth itself seemed unstable. Famines in the early nineties had taken a terrible toll. Earthquakes had devastated Asia in the sixties. (Asia by the way refers to the western coast of Turkey, and this was the people to whom this Revelation was written.)

In 79 Vesuvius erupted. Pompeii and neighboring towns were buried. And all over the ancient world the cloud from this event created a sense of foreboding. To some it must have seemed like heaven and earth were passing away.

More than this it was a time political upheaval as well. We know what a traumatic national tragedy like 911 can do to the psyche of a country. Can you imagine what it would be like to have your capital totally destroyed and all the people in your country become refugees?

That’s exactly what happened in 70 AD. The Jews rebelled against the Romans, and it ended in disaster. The temple and the city were totally destroyed. (By the way this terrible event reminded some of what happened when Babylon conquered their country long ago. Thus the many references to Babylon in the book of Revelation are rather transparent symbols of the hated Roman Empire.)

Anyway, to put it succinctly the world was in a mess toward the end of the first century, and Christians were wondering what it might mean. They believed that God was sovereign and that Jesus was Lord. But, if that was true, how could you explain what was happening?

John’s vision explained it this way: the old heaven and the old earth are passing away. And God is going to remake them. More than that, the Jerusalem that was destroyed will be replaced by a

new one, a holy city that will come straight from heaven. It will be beautiful, like a bride adorned for her husband.

What did John's vision mean? It meant that disasters ... both natural disasters and those caused by human beings would not have the final word. God is in the process of recreating this world in which we live. There is a life giving force at work in our world that is greater than the powers of destruction. It was the driving force behind creation itself, and it will not be denied. We have a "revelation" that what God began in Genesis will come to glorious fruition. There will be a new creation. There will be a New Jerusalem. In the end God's way will prevail.

But, this cosmic vision of a new creation has profound personal implications. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17) How can we become new? What are the promises of God that will not only recreate our world but will also recreate our lives?

THE PROMISE OF PRESENCE

There are at least four "new creation" promises in our text for today. First, the God of creation promises to make His home among human beings.

This is one of the great themes of the entire Bible. God is always reaching out to His people. In the Old Testament God is always promising, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." (See Leviticus 26:11-12; Jeremiah 31:33) The Bible reveals what we could never guess. The God of this massive and magnificent creation in which we live us wants to be with us.

In the New Testament we read that the creative Word of God, the Word that made the universe became "flesh" and dwelt among us. (John 1) The doctrine of the incarnation means that God himself is with us. This is a very important and basic point that cannot be overemphasized.

In our lesson for today the voice from heaven said, "See, the home of God is among mortals." That's too mild a translation. The word translated "see" means "look out" or "pay attention." And so we might expand the translation to say something like, "Can't you see that God is right here with you? Wake up! Pay attention! This is important!"

When I was growing up the choir would sing this almost every Sunday to begin our worship service. God himself is with us. The song was always the same but for me the message never grew stale. I would always listen with a sense of awe.

Think about what this means today. This is a holy place. God himself is with us. Do you believe this? Do you have a vision, a revelation of what this might mean for your life?

If we could only get a sense of what it means to live every day with the presence of God, I think our lives would be totally transformed. Some spiritual guides refer to this as practicing the presence of God, and I think that this is something that we should strive to do.

We should sing “God himself is with us” not only to start our worship service, but also to start our day as well. The Bible teaches us that we are God’s “temple” and God goes with us wherever we go.

The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians wrote, “... we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’”

THE PROMISE OF COMFORT

The Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is with us always. That’s the first promise of the new creation. The second promise of the new creation is this. The God who is with us seeks to comfort us. The God who is with us is a God of compassion. Our passage for today tells us that God will “wipe away every tear” from our eyes.

This is our final revelation of God. God is the God who wipes away tears. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. I never fail to read this passage at a funeral because this promise often brings comfort when nothing else can. Some people say “time heals all wounds.” That’s not necessarily true.

But, God can heal all wounds. God can wipe away the bitter tears. God can give us hope when all seems lost. I know that this promise is true because I have leaned upon this promise personally. And many of you here this morning know that it’s true because you have leaned upon this promise personally as well.

In the Old Testament the promises of God’s comfort were particularly prevalent during the time of the Babylonian Captivity. The temple was destroyed, the people of God were taken into captivity and they had given up hope. They wouldn’t sing the songs of Zion any more. They would lay day their instruments by the river and die of depression.

But, it was then that the prophets wrote, “... the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces ...” (Isaiah 25:8) “Truly, O people of Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you.” (Isaiah 30:19)

God can give hope to those who have no hope.

Jesus took this as the theme song of His ministry. Quoting the prophet Isaiah Jesus said that he was the one who would usher in this new age of hope for the hopeless.

He would heal those that could not be healed. He would free the captives. He would comfort those who mourn. He would bring good news to the poor. (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:18-21)

In Jesus we get a flesh and blood picture of God's compassion. We get a foretaste of what the Spirit of God can do in the world.

God can turn sadness into joy. God can transform our hearts. (Jeremiah 31:13; Revelation 7:17)

THE PROMISE OF DEATH DEFEATED

So, in this new world that we asked to envision, God is with us. God comforts us. And third God promises us that in the world to come death will be defeated forever. Our lesson for today puts it this way, "Death will be no more." To say it another way, "No more loneliness, no more tears, no more death."

Today of course our lives are dominated by death. According to some, death and taxes are the two great realities of life. One approach might be to just reluctantly accept our "fate" and make the most of the time that we have.

A while back atheists in London decided to advertise on those big double-decker buses. They wrote on the side of the bus something like, "There is no God so just sit back and enjoy the ride."

That's one approach. But, those of us who are Christians see the world in a different way. We see a new world coming, a world in which there is no more death.

The Bible tells us that the last enemy to be destroyed will be death. (1 Corinthians 15:26) And with the Apostle Paul we imagine a time when this mortal body will put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:54-55) We see a time coming when our lives will no longer be controlled by our fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

And we believe that Jesus is harbinger of that coming kingdom. Jesus is the first fruits of those who will be raised from the dead.

As it happened with Jesus it will happen with us as well. The God who created the world will recreate our lives in a new and marvelous way. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

In the world to come death will die and with it all those things that go along with death: mourning and crying and pain.

THE PROMISE OF ABUNDANT LIFE

So, now we've talked about three out of the four promises of the new creation. God will be with us. God will care for us. Death will die. And finally, life is and will be abundant. God gives us a drink from the spring of living water. (Revelation 21:6)

In the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah also conceived of the coming salvation of God as a time of abundance. He wrote, "... everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." (Isaiah 55:1)

Now what was the prophet talking about? We all know that we can't buy a loaf of bread without money. It was true then, and it was true now.

Well, the prophet wasn't just talking about bread and water. He was talking about the grace and provision of God. Just as God provided water and Manna for his people as they wandered in the wilderness so God could be trusted to provide what was needed for their journey in the future.

We still make that claim when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" and communion is another way that we communicate the message. The bread and juice are common symbols of an uncommon grace.

In the Bible there has always been a connection between our daily provisions and God's eternal promise. Remember the woman at the well. She came for water, but Jesus offered her "living water," the water that would bring life eternal.

And in the book from which our lesson for today is taken, the book of Revelation we read that the "... Lamb at the center of the throne" will be our shepherd, and he will guide us "to the springs of the water of life ..." (Revelation 7:17) The voice from heaven proclaims, "... let everyone who is thirsty come." (Revelation 22:13)

What is this water? It is the gift of an abundant life, life that is eternal. And this gift begins here and now. This gift transforms not only our future but also our present.

A NEW WORLD COMING

Have you ever heard about the man who was so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly good?

If we misinterpret the book of Revelation it can make us this way. If we think that the book is just about what will happen when the Kingdom comes we can even be irresponsible in our lifestyle.

But, notice that verses 5 and 6 of our lesson for today begin with the present tense and then move to the future tense. The voice from heaven says, "See, I am making all things new ... I am the

Alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

In other words the process of a new creation begins now and continues into the future.

If we trust the promises of God, our life changes here and now. A life that seemed pointless and hopeless is filled with a spring of living water. There is a new vitality to life.

I read of a woman who had raised twelve children. Eleven of those children were foster children whom she adopted. And all of those foster children had special needs.

The newspaper reporter asked her how she, in her limited circumstances, dared to attempt such a thing. What had led her to adopt all these children? The lady, a woman of great faith replied, “I saw a new world coming.”

This woman was heavenly minded, but it made her do good here on earth.

PAINTING A NEW PICTURE

Sometimes I think we Christians are too negative. We rail against all that is wrong with our society. (And heaven knows that there is plenty wrong.)

But, this passage from Revelation suggests a different approach. Perhaps our job is to give the world a different vision. Our job is to paint a picture of a different future, an alternative image of how things are and how they can be.

Instead of always complaining about how bad things are today, maybe it is our job is to paint a picture of the world to come. Imagine a world with no tears, no death, no mourning or pain. Imagine a world with no need for cemeteries or therapists.

Can you picture it? Can you conceive of such a thing?

I know better than most that this dream is important. When the call comes in the middle of the night and the news is bad, this is the dream that the people want to see. These are the words that the people want to hear.

David Buttrick, a great preacher and teacher told a story about a church that had a stained glass problem. High above the chancel, set in glass was a picture of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, dipping out of the clouds toward the earth.

What was the problem?

Well, some of the members loved the window. They thought it was beautiful.

And some of the members hated the window. They thought it was too “otherworldly.” With all the problems of the world, they didn’t need a window that represented what they called “pie in the sky by and by.”

The stained glass window controversy, like so many controversies in the church, raged for many years. But, over time all the members came to agree. The window should stay.

Now how did that happen? Did the dissenters decide to leave and form their own church?

No, over the years the glass faded so that through the golden image of the New Jerusalem, they could make out the towers of their own city; one city seen through the vision of another.

And so they decided that the vision of the New Jerusalem was not so “otherworldly” at all.

That faded stained glass image gives us a picture of how we are to live. We are meant to live in this world while being guided by a vision of God’s promises for the future. We use the heavenly vision to make a difference in our lives today.

Today is All Saints Day, a day when we celebrate the fact that God is indeed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

The Bible tells us that all are alive to God. (Luke 20:38) God’s Kingdom stretches for all eternity and today we celebrate the fact that all the saints ... those living and those dead ... come together to sing God’s praise and give God glory.

Today we celebrate the fact that we have “holy sweet communion” with a heavenly host. Today is about an eternal vision that gives us hope for today.

Let us stand as to celebrate that “communion of saints” by saying what we believe using the Apostle’s Creed followed by singing what we believe using the hymn, “For All the Saints.”