

Scripture: Revelation 21:10,22; 22:5

And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Reflection

Well hold on to your hats folks because this week we are jumping into the wild and wonderful book of Revelation! Now I'm not sure what your knowledge of this book is, but I'm going to make the assumption that we are all like most mainline protestant Christians who have mostly avoided it. Maybe you know about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, or you've heard something about the battle of Armageddon and the Mark of the Beast. Maybe you've heard other Christians talking about the Rapture or the end times. And maybe you've thought "ummm that sounds a little weird, a little spooky, maybe we'll just pretend this book doesn't exist and focus on the love of Jesus instead."

Well you wouldn't be alone in thinking that. The book of Revelation barely made it into the Bible in the first place and other Christian leaders in the past have tried to take it out – but here it is, it's in our Bible now, so what do we do with it?

There are two different ways to read Revelation. One way is to read it as a vision of the future – a prediction of what is going to happen. This is called the "Millennialist Reading", made popular by an author named Hal Lindsey in the 70's and 80's who interpreted each symbol in the text to mean something from today's context that indicated that the end of the world is coming. This reading approaches the text with the understanding that Jesus is coming back for a second coming, and that Jesus gave John a vision of all the things that would happen in those last days, and they were meant to be interpreted thousands of years

later by us. Those who are followers of Christ will be saved and those who are not will be damned. The focus in this interpretation is on saving yourself and those you love from eternal punishment.

One of the many troubling things about this way of reading Revelation is that it excuses us from any responsibility for the world, for taking care of the earth or each other in our current reality. It says that Jesus is coming and as long as we believe in him, we don't need to worry about preserving the earth's resources or improving life for people who are treated unfairly. It's all going to end soon anyway, so there's no point. God's judgement will take care of everything.

Another troubling way Revelation has been used is to scare people, especially children and youth, into confessing their love for Jesus. There are countless adults who are "deconstructing" their faith right now and realizing that they experienced trauma as kids when they were threatened with the idea that the world could end at any moment and if they didn't believe in Jesus they were doomed. They tell stories of going to bed at night, worried that their best friend or their mom or their grandpa would go to hell because they didn't believe in Jesus.

When we hear these stories, we tend to think that the book of Revelation is harmful and better off ignored. Which is probably why I've subconsciously avoided preaching on it for the last several years. But if we don't study it and look for other interpretations of the text, it is left in the hands of those who use it in toxic ways. It is part of our scripture and our faith tradition, like it or not, and if we don't claim it then someone else will.

Which brings me to the second way of reading Revelation, the "past-historical interpretation." When we read Revelation, or any part of the bible, in this way it means that we strive to understand what was going on when the text was written and, through learning about that history, we gain some insight into our world today.

We know that a man named John (not the apostle John, another John) wrote this as a letter to be circulated amongst several of the early Christian churches during a time when the Roman Empire was using violence and economic exploitation to claim and remain in power by proclaiming that it was the will of the gods. He used a style of writing that was popular at the time called the Apocalypse, which meant "unveiling" or "revealing" – this style was often in the form of a dramatic vision and the Book of Daniel is another example of it. John used images and numbers and symbols from the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, to give the churches hope that they would survive the brutal treatment they were experiencing at the hands of the Roman Empire and to remind them that God's dream for the world was something else.

John stands in a long line of Moses and the prophets followed by Jesus and Paul, who all say in different ways that God's will for us is not empire, God's kingdom looks different than the one we have built on earth. In the beginning of this letter, John addresses 7 churches and either offers them encouragement or chastises them for things they have been doing wrong. The churches that draw the most criticism are the ones that are not differentiating themselves enough from this world – they are acting just like the empire itself.

Rather than symbolizing the future end times that are to come, a past historical interpretation of the Book of Revelation indicates that John was talking about the trials and tribulations of their current situation. He uses symbols and satire to tell the churches that "Rome was the opposite of what it claimed to be. The empire that claimed to bring peace on earth, and whose emperors were spoken of as lord, saviour, son of god, and even as god, was in fact the incarnation of disorder, violence and death" (Borg).

If you are really interested in diving into what the symbolism means and how it connects to the Hebrew Bible, I'm happy to find you some good books or we could even do a Bible study on it. But for now I'd like to turn to the final chapter of the book, where we find ourselves this morning. After describing their current situation living under Rome by using images of chaos and violence, John brings his readers to the vision of the Holy City – his dream about what God's creation will look like when we are truly reconciled to God.

If we understand that John was writing to his fellow Christians about their specific trials, we can see the message of hope he was sending to them for THIS life that they were living. He again uses symbols and imagery from the Hebrew Bible, reminding the churches that they belong to a long tradition of God's people who began when God created the earth, and he looks forward to a time when we live in God's kingdom here on earth. He looks back to the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were shut out of the gates of the garden, and looks forward to the time when all the gates of the Holy City are always open and everyone can come in – people from all the nations, and even the kings that he had condemned for following "the Beast" earlier in his letter were invited in.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the story of creation has now become a tree of healing for all the nations, and we will finally see God's face. God's people have wanted to see God's face since the beginning of time – Moses came the closest when he asked for permission and God said "you can see my back side instead." But in John's vision, ALL of God's people will see her face.

And finally, John reaches back through the Biblical narrative to the creation story where "a river flows out of Eden to water the garden," bringing us to the new Jerusalem where garden and city meet, where the river of the water of life flows from God's own throne to water the trees whose leaves are for healing and whose fruit never fails. The symbol of water appears

throughout the bible, in testaments old and new, as the symbol of new life. Moses led the people to freedom to a new life through the parted waters, and when the Israelites were thirsty in the desert Moses struck a rock at God's command and water poured out for them. The prophet Jeremiah describes God as "the spring of living water" (Jer 2:13), and Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that he offers living water to anyone who wants it (John 4).

The Book of Revelation has a lot of strange stuff in it, and it can seem a bit alarming if you just read it on its own without a good guide to how it relates to the rest of the Bible. But when we have time to do a deep dive and learn more about how the early churches were living and what they were facing in their daily lives, we start to see how beautiful John's vision of hope was for those people and what hope it might offer us today. It's silly to try and compare if our lives are harder than our ancestors' were, but certainly we can say that they lived in trying times and so do we – the challenges we face are different but still we live in a world where there are oppressive systems, violence and poverty. We still live in a world where the rich exploit the poor, where people kill each other and claim that it was God's will, and where God's justice is badly needed. And we still need John's vision of hope that says it IS possible for us to live in a world where the light of God shines, where we see God's face, and where the water of life flows abundantly.

John finishes his letter with an invitation to the churches and to us: "Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (Rev. 22:17).

May we accept this invitation and hold on to the hope that John's Revelation offers to us, for today and always. Amen.