

A New Earth
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November 1, 2015

Revelation 21:1-6

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.”

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.

A NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

Do we believe in heaven? Of course we do.
 But, like most theological questions the devil (or the angel) is in the details.

What do we believe about heaven, and why is it important? That’s what we’re going to talk about today, All Saints Day.

In our lesson for today heaven is not a place to which we go. Heaven is a place that comes to us. Heaven is part of a new creation which also includes earth.

In John's Spirit inspired vision of the future he sees a new heaven and a new earth. Why is there a new heaven and a new earth? Because the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

You may remember the first creation story from Genesis. The earth is described as a formless void with the earth covered with water. The dry land appeared as a result of the Spirit's moving.

But, in this vision of a new creation, God does more than make dry, inhabitable land appear.

In the new creation, there is no more sea.

Now we know that the sea is necessary. If the sea disappeared we would be toast, literally. But, in the ancient world the sea represented chaos, evil and death. What makes the new creation different from the old creation is that chaos and evil and death will be defeated once and for all.

The sea of sadness will be no more in the new creation.

NEW JERUSALEM

But, one thing will be present, a new Jerusalem. The Holy City will descend from heaven as God's gift to the world. She will be prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Most commentators suggest that the book of Revelation was written quite a while after the destruction of Jerusalem and Herod's Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. For the first readers of the book of Revelation, Jerusalem had already passed away. Her destruction was complete, and God's people were scattered all over the world.

This was very similar to what happened during the Babylonian captivity in 585 BC. Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruins, God's people were in captivity to the Babylonians. And hope was almost nonexistent. In the words of the Psalmist,

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept ..."

In Revelation a world is described where the tables are turned. The contrast is profound.

Babylon is the city that has fallen.

And the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven to take her place.

Babylon was a curse on the world.
Jerusalem will be a blessing for the world.

Babylon was the source of many tears.
In the new Jerusalem, tears will be wiped away.

The old Babylon was like a prostitute, filled with injustice and broken dreams.

The new Jerusalem is like a bride adorned for her husband, full of joy and hope for the future.

Now you might rightly ask,

“Why all this talk about Babylon?
Her Empire had faded long ago.”

True, but the Roman Empire had taken her place.
The book of Revelation was written in the face of brutal persecution by that Empire.

Attacking the Empire directly would be fatal to those early Christians.

So, they spoke about the coming age in a symbolic way.
What they meant would be glaringly obvious to those who first heard the message.

God delivered His people from the Babylonian Captivity and built a new Jerusalem.

And in the same way God would deliver His people from the clutches of the Roman Empire.

The old was passing away.
A new Day was dawning.
A new Jerusalem would come down from heaven.

Exactly how would this new Kingdom be different?
A voice from heaven makes it plain.

GOD'S PRESENCE

First, God would be a part of the world. God would make his home among mortals. This is, of course, another way of talking about the incarnation.

God was in Christ. In Jesus the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But, in John's Revelation we learn that this was just the beginning. John sees a time when the presence of the Almighty will be palpable.

As the Apostle Paul put it,
 "Now we see through a mirror darkly but then face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In the ancient world mirrors gave a distorted picture of the object they reflected. And Paul tells us that in our present life we can only see a dim reflection of God's plan.

But, the day is coming when we will see more clearly. We will see face to face.

Christ was the beginning, the first fruits of those who will be raised to new life. But, there will also be a day when heaven will come to earth and God will be with His people forever.

TEARS WIPED AWAY

So, when God comes to be with His people, how will things be different? First, God himself will wipe away every tear from the eyes of His people.

There's a wonderful commercial on TV that portrays the power of wiping away tears.

It begins with a father wiping away the tears of his daughter through all the travails of life. When she falls off her bike, he wipes away her tears. When her first date doesn't go as planned he wipes away her tears. And so forth.

Finally, the day comes when the daughter is married and during the traditional father/daughter dance, it is the daughter who wipes away the tears of the father.

Those images don't need any explanation. We know the deep feelings and the love behind those scenes.

And that's why this image is used in our lesson for today. The incarnation means that God cares about us and is present with us to wipe away our tears.

We see this compassion in the ministry of Jesus, but we also envision a time when God himself will be with us in a new way and personally wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We might not know exactly how that will happen, but the image conveys the basic message of the Kingdom of God.

This Kingdom will not be about creating tears.
This Kingdom will be about wiping tears away.

NO MORE DEATH

There is a second thing that will be different when the Kingdom comes. Death will be no more.

Again, we have a foretaste of this with the coming of Christ. The resurrection is not just something that happened to one man long ago. It marks the beginning of an eternal hope for all of God's people.

This is why we celebrate All Saints Day.

In the Presbyterian Church we don't pray to saints. We have access to God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our prayers don't need to take a detour.

But, we do believe in the communion of saints. We believe that our ancestors in the faith are not dead and gone. Nor do we believe they come back as ghostly apparitions that haunt our lives (as is the creepy idea behind Halloween).

We believe, as the hymn puts it, "we feebly struggle; they in glory shine; yet all are one in Thee for all are Thine ..."

The faithful who die are (as the Bible puts it) dead in Christ. Our confession tells us "in life and in death we belong to God."

There is never a time when we are beyond the loving touch of the God who created heaven and earth.

And this loving God who wipes away our tears and points us toward a sure and certain hope of life eternal. One day the final enemy will be defeated, and death will be no more. That's how the new heaven and the new earth will be different.

And since death will be no more, some other things will be different as well.

There will be no more grief.
There will be no more crying.
There will be no more pain.

ALREADY FINISHED

The passage ends with the voice from heaven crying, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

This verse reminds us of creation when God "rested" from all he had done on the seventh day. And it also reminds us of the cross when, just before he died, Jesus said, "It is finished."

From the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end ... it is already finished. It is complete even before it happens.

And because of that, it is possible for us to participate in this new reality today.

Heaven is not just about where we will go when we die. The hope of a new heaven and a new earth energizes and directs our lives today. With all the Saints we strive for the kingdom that comes and his will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

The vision of the Kingdom that comes gives meaning and purpose to the life we live today. The vision is not just a vision of a new heaven.

It is also a vision of a new earth.

And we can begin to make that earthly vision a reality today.

The book of Hebrews puts it this way,

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1)

And what kind of race might that be?

If we are surrounded by the witness of saints, past, present and future, how will that affect the way we live our life?

How can we connect with the eternal right now?

I suggest that we take our cue from the vision.

We should prioritize our life based upon the characteristics of this new creation.

PRESENCE

God is with his people in the new creation.

Maybe we should take the ministry of presence more seriously today.

There’s a commercial on TV where a young couple are playing footsie under the table.

But, they’re not looking at each other. Why?

Because they are busy looking at their cell phones!

I’m beginning to wonder if the big issue in our world today is the issue of presence.

Are we really present with others or are we just in the same room? I admit that I struggle with this as well. The convenience of modern technology tempts us to connect in a virtual way instead of a real way.

And yet there is nothing virtual about the Kingdom that comes.

God Himself is with us.

Do we miss the divine in our life because we are not really present?

The gospel of John begins with these words about Jesus,

“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1:10-11)

God was in Christ but no one recognized him.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, but we were too busy looking at our cell phones to notice!

Love begins with presence. When we are really present with each other and at the same time open to the presence of God, we begin to participate in the kingdom that comes here and now. Let us enter into the holy by singing, “God Himself is with us.”

COMPASSION

The second mark of the Kingdom that comes is a God who wipes away every tear. Maybe wiping away tears, both literally and figuratively is a worthy task for those who look for the Kingdom that comes.

When we wipe away tears, we come near to the Kingdom. We come near to God. This is the ministry of compassion.

People always complain that following Jesus is too hard. Yes, those who dedicate their lives to serving God can maybe come close, but what chance do we regular people have? Following Jesus is just too hard.

But, can't we just wipe away a few tears?

Can't we do just one thing that brings the world a little closer toward the Kingdom where compassion is valued more than might?

I think that's very doable, and I suspect you know of someone right now who needs this simple but profound act of care.

We often wipe away tears in private. It does not garner attention or the praise of others.

And yet, in faith we know that this act connects us with the eternal.

It is how the Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

DEALING WITH DEATH

The third mark of the Kingdom is the death of death.
In the coming Kingdom death is no more.

In our world death is the great enemy.

Have you seen those commercials that promote cancer research?

Patients talk to cancer as if it were some sort of person. They talk about what they have lost to the disease. But, then with fire in their eyes, they say that they're going to fight back.

We all fight back against the threat of our own mortality in some way.

Several years ago Steve Jobs gave a baccalaureate address at USC.

He told the graduating seniors that learning of his life threatening illness made him want to be more productive and do more. He worked harder because he wanted to accomplish more with the time he had left.

Unlike Steve, some people withdraw.
Others ignore this reality as long as possible.

What should the Christian response to death be?

Christians continue to proclaim the good news, the gospel all their lives in word and in deed. We do not run from death by working at a feverish pitch. We do not withdraw. We do not fill our life with endless distractions.

We continue to work for the Kingdom because we know that the battle has already been won. God was in Christ and in his resurrection we have hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. We believe (as our second hymn puts it) that morning has broken like the first morning, and the light of that new day is an eternal light.

THE ROLE OF SAINTS TODAY

In the early church the enduring faith of Christians in the face of certain death, made the church grow like wildfire. The old saying went, "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church." Christians facing great persecution died with hope. And people took notice.

We are part of an eternal communion of saints. We believe that the saints who feebly struggle in their mortal life today are in sweet communion with the saints who live in glory. We are connected by the Eternal One who created heaven and earth.

And we look forward to that day when death will die and grief will be a thing of the past.

It is not a matter of getting angry or trying to save ourselves by leaving a legacy.

It is not a matter of trying to ignore the inevitable.

It is a matter of faith.

Folks who have a hope that is eternal live differently today.

Yes, we do mourn.

But, we do not mourn as those who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) Why?

Because we live with one foot in eternity.

We live with one foot in the Kingdom that comes.

We live with the hope, the sure and certain expectation of a time when heaven and earth will be restored, and the old will pass away.

Each week I follow the same schedule.

On Tuesday I begin my study of the text and prepare a Bible study.

On Wednesday I lead the Bible study.

On Thursday I pull out an old bulletin to help me prepare a new worship service.

And from time to time I stop to read the names on the back of that old bulletin.

Quite often they are the names of those who were sick at the time and now they have joined the saints in glory.

I feel sad.

I miss them.

I wish I didn't have to say goodbye to people I had grown to love.

But, then I remember (as we often say at their funeral) the things about them that were good and kind and faithful.

I give thanks for their life and for my life.
I remember the promise.

We are connected. We are one. And I am encouraged by their witness to persevere and run the race God has set out for me.

We are imperfect people who live in an imperfect world.
In fact things often seem pretty messed up.

But, we see a new day coming.
We envision a time when people from the North, South, East and West will gather at the heavenly banquet.

The meal we eat together this day, the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of that divine banquet.

In this meal, thirsty people are given a drink from the eternal spring. (Revelation 21:6)

Amen.