

Creating Anew

Revelation 21: 1-6a; John 11: 32-44

This morning, many congregations are celebrating All Saints or All Souls Day. It is a time when we remember those we have lost through the year. It is a time to acknowledge death and to acknowledge the grief it brings. For some, it is the loss of a loved one. For others, it is the loss of an ideal or something that felt certain.

We enter into John's Gospel as Mary tells Jesus of Lazarus' passing. Jesus knows resurrection is possible. This doesn't stop him from feeling the grief of Lazarus' death. He feels the weight of the loss. He is disturbed at the sight of Mary and her companions pain, and he weeps along with them.

All Saints is a day to feel the weight of loss. It is also a day to celebrate the possibility of tomorrow. We get this message in the Book of Revelation. Before I get too far into talking about Revelation, it might help us to get some things out in the open.

Revelation is one of those texts that makes very little sense to most modern seekers. Our reading this morning is short and sweet so you might not have caught that. If you've been around the church for awhile or if you've ever been the recipient of someone trying to save you, then you may have heard a bit about the end times.

For some, Revelation is the grounding for a belief in the Apocalypse. This is the thinking that God will come down from heaven to punish the wicked and raise the righteous from the dead. Such a theology flows right out of the imagination of Dante's *Inferno* and translates it into similarly gruesome and fantastical images for our modern-day world.

It is from this that Revelation gets a bad rap. Revelation is without a doubt a unique and interesting scripture. It *is* full of strange imagery. We do hear about a beast that has seven heads and ten horns (13:1), and a beast with horns like a lamb and who spoke like a dragon (13:11). Yet, Revelation is so much more than a gory depiction of the end times. It is *apocalypsis*, a Greek word meaning "to reveal" or "to disclose". It was a teaching written for the church of its own time.

The Book of Revelation is an instructive letter (an epistle) written to the seven churches in Asia Minor. Just as with many epistles, Revelation was concerned with how to be a Jesus follower at a time when Rome was opposed to Jesus. At its writing, believers did not fit into the socio-political order; they neither worshiped the emperor cult, nor were they fully Jewish. They were neither accepted by Rome, nor by wider Jewish society.

It was a difficult place to be. Like all human beings, members of the seven churches wanted to fit into the surrounding community. They also wrestled with building a community that wasn't afraid to ask how do we love God, and how do we extend that love out into the world until it reaches all people everywhere.

They were in a delicate limbo between seeking acceptance and staying true to their faith. The society around them found their faith intolerable. As you have probably heard many times, the early followers of Jesus faced intense pressure to show allegiance to the Roman Empire. They faced ostracism, persecution, arrest and martyrdom.

It is no surprise then that members of these communities were straying under the weight of standing out from the crowd. Earlier in the text, (before our reading this morning) the author points out specific behaviors. The churches lacked a commitment to God and the ways of God (2:4; 3:16), and they ate food offered to idols (2:14,20).

In response, the author of Revelation called on the seven churches to be "faithful unto death". God will not abandon them to face it alone. These early Christ followers were admonished to not give

up. They ought not accommodate the empire. By remaining steadfast, they would eventually prevail. (2:10)

Tradition would have us say these early Christians will prevail over the devil. That was the takeaway for many for countless generations. In a way it is true. Below this surface interpretation, however, we find a deeper meaning.

Peppered throughout the 22 chapters of Revelation, the Roman Empire *is* equated to Satan. We see that most clearly in chapter 2 where the author ties a particular temple in Pergamum to Satan. (2:13) Pergamum had a temple where the glories of empire were celebrated and worshiped.

The early Jesus followers were told this empire will fall. They will be able to endure. They will find peace. Revelation painted an elaborate picture for them. All the fantastical imagery and word play served to paint a picture of hope. It was the story of how an oppressed people longing for a safe and secure way to be in the world find the strength endure. They found the strength to not only endure but to experience God's kin-dom. Revelation imagined what the world will look like when God's kin-dom ushers in a new earth, a new Jerusalem, the world anew.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered such a story to our society not long ago. In his *I have a Dream Speech*, Dr. King said,

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today ... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together ... This is our hope ... This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring ... And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York ... Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

Today, on All Saints Day, we remember the seekers and believers in Christ who paved the way to hope for us. Whether that is the author of Revelation, the Gospel writer of the Book of John, or a modern prophet like Martin Luther King Jr., their lives and their writings point the way forward.

Our siblings in Christ remind us that oppression, in any and all forms, does not get the final word. Disaster and calamity can be made right. Over these extended election cycles, it might be hard to remember. As we watch our fellow Americans struggle with hurricane after hurricane, or with tornadoes, or wild fires, we might forget. Climate upheaval and social disintegration are not the end of our story or the American story. We can always become a new people.

We can bring a New Earth. We can bring a New Jerusalem. We can manifest God's kin-dom right here and right now. We can be a part of making all things new.

Just look at how the changes in our daily lives during the recent pandemic made a new earth all around us. Waterways became healthier. Animals roamed more freely and reproduced more than they had in years. Families and friends shifted priorities and began spending more quality time together.

A New Earth is possible. A New Heaven is around the corner. Let it come, O God. Let it be a place where we stop being color blind and start being culturally sensitive to one another. Let it be a place where the hungry are not only fed but fed with food which sustains health, the environment and our local economies. Let this New Jerusalem be a place where the station of one's birth and the color of one's skin no longer becomes a predictor for how much time will be spent in prison or how far one can go in life.

Come, New Jerusalem! Come, New Earth! We will make the way ready. Communities of faith rise up against the tyranny of the misuse of our religion. Rise up against divisions and rise up against ideologies which teach us that our neighbor is not worth our time because they vote for a different party. Rise up against the ruling forces which tell us our neighbors deserve to be left out in the cold because saving a few pennies on our taxes is more important than taking care of one another.

People of Christ rise up, resurrect, and bring the New Heaven and the New Jerusalem!