Easter 5 – In Life and in Death

Prayer for Illumination

You, O Lord, have the words of eternal life. To you we turn so that we may hear and follow you. Amen.

Psalm 148:1-14 (NRSV)

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! 3 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. 6 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. 7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, 8 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! 9 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! 10 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! 12 Young men and women alike, old and young together! 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. 14 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Revelation 21:1-6

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; 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.

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I remember a conversation with an active church member. He was clearly troubled and paused as if to gather his thoughts before speaking. With a plaintive look on his face he asked, “Where is this world heading?”

He spoke of the diminishment of character among national leaders. He spoke of the nation-wide problems of drugs and related crimes. And he spoke of the loss of civility and respect for one another. I don’t remember what had generated his concern and he may not have said, but watching the news today any caring person can wonder “Where is this world heading?”

There are perils in the Middle East. The threat of a Brexit crash. The revival of nationalistic rhetoric along with shootings of innocent persons near and far. There is the political turmoil of Venezuela, its runaway inflation and resulting hunger and crime. There are the ongoing problems of Central America that lead desperately poor people to walk over 1,000 miles to the US in search of a better life. North Korea continues its missile testing and the US relationship with Iran seems again unstable.

Where *is* this world heading?

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Surely John of Patmos’ contemporaries must have raised that question. Rome ruled the Middle East with a heavy hand. When Jews rebelled in 70 CE the Romans leveled Jerusalem and its Temple. Christians, a minority group in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, were persecuted for not worshipping Caesar.

God gave John an answer; it came through a vision that God commanded John to write for the churches in his region. John’s vision included a mighty battle between God and all that is evil. While the battle was fought at a cosmic level John reminded his contemporaries about the importance of living faithfully and not succumbing to the temptations to abandon their faith. It is as if each one of us has a part in that battle.

Then, in what we read today, we see the ultimate outcome of this world when God brings into being a new heaven and a new earth along with a New Jerusalem.

Reading this passage we realize that the end of the Bible is not about an ending; it is about a beginning. The Bible began with God’s good creation into which sin and death entered. The Bible ends with God’s renewed creation where sin and death have been banished. The Bible began with God walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden. The Bible ends with God’s dwelling with humankind.

“Where’s this world heading?” What John of Patmos saw was the restoration of all creation. God would live with humanity and all that caused the world great suffering would be eliminated: death, grief, mourning, crying and pain…all gone.

This vision has been a great comfort to people who have experienced or seen loved ones suffer much. How can we believe such a vision? Is it not possible that this is just a fantasy for desperate people?

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Here is why I believe it is reasonable to believe John’s vision.

John’s vision is consistent with the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Also, John began, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place….”[[2]](#footnote-2) For John, this vision was not idle speculation, or the thoughts of a desperate man, but rather God’s plan for humankind.

Further, John reported being “in the Spirit”[[3]](#footnote-3) or a prophetic trance. This vision was a gift from God. As a part of this vision God told John to “write this for these words are trustworthy and true”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

John’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth is also consistent with Jesus in whom heaven and earth were first joined. You will remember that he was called “Emmanuel” – God with us.

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If Eugene Peterson is correct that John’s Revelation was not a new revelation but a fresh communication of the faith,[[5]](#footnote-5) we find antecedents in Scripture which also attest to its reliability.

Paul to the Romans,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And again

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This reaffirmation of the Old and New Testaments’ witness is also affirmed in the church’s theological statements. It is the first question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q1 – What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A1 – that I belong-body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ….

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Brief Statement of Faith* affirms that we belong to God and that we can trust our God

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The love of God

And the communion of the Holy Spirit,

We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel

Whom alone we worship and serve.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We believe that we are given life by God and, by grace, God has made us a part of the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, begun in Jesus’ resurrection.

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In addition to John’s vision being consistent with the Old and New Testaments and being affirmed in the church’s theological statements, its hope has also inspired countless people before us.

Julian of Norwich lived from the mid-1300s to the middle 1400s. She wrote the earliest surviving book written in the English language by a woman.[[9]](#footnote-9) It was she who said

All shall be well

And all shall be well,

And all manner of thing shall be well.

It was a Christian woman Katharina von Schlegel who wrote in 1752 the song sung by generations of Christians

Be still my soul

Thy best, thy heavenly Friend

Through thorny ways

Leads to a joyful end.

For all these reasons I think it is reasonable to trust John’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

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So, if you find yourself asking, “Where is this world headed?” remember and hold on to the hope that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth.

In the long view the world will become a place of peace and harmony and dwelling with God. Again, in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

…the ransomed of the LORD shall return,

and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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That would be the end except God didn’t just give the vision as comfort for John, he gave John a job to do: “Write this” God said “for these words are trustworthy and true.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

This vision of John comes at the end of the New Testament as an exclamation poiont comes at the end of a sentence; it does not eliminate the call of Christ that we read Gospels or the Epistles of the New Testament, it inspires our response.

We are encouraged to the sick and feed the hungry because we know that a world without suffering and want is where this world is ultimately heading.

We are called to forgive because all sorrow and sighing will one day flee away.

We are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God because one day our God will dwell with us.

There are people living without homes only miles from our dwellings. On Wednesday members of this church will visit some of them, interact with them and offer them the gift of friendship and supplies all in the name of the One who is creating a new heaven and a new earth.

John’s vision comforts our fears about the world’s ultimate direction and it inspires our action because we have hope that, even now, God is at work through his people to bring about the restoration of all creation.

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1. Isaiah 65:17-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 1:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 1:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 21:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1988, p. xi-xii [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Romans 8:38-39 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Romans 14:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_of_Norwich> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Isaiah 51:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Revelation 21:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)