

## **Everything Old is New Again**

a sermon on Revelation 21:1-6

by Nancy Raca, April 24, 2016, Covenant United Methodist Church

Several years ago, I participated in a year-long Bible study on the book of John. It was life-changing for me because it was the first time I really looked in depth at what was in the Bible. I credit that Bible study with putting me on the road that would eventually lead me to becoming a pastor.

So when that study ended I was all excited to sign up for the next year's class. But then I found out the topic: the book of Revelation. And I ran screaming in the other direction...

Revelation is that book in the Bible that many people, maybe especially more progressive Christians like me, would like to ignore. Even Martin Luther, one of the most influential Christians of all time, said, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book...Christ is neither taught nor known in it."

*Christ is neither taught nor known in it...*I guess people have this feeling about Revelation because it has some pretty alarming imagery. It's about the "end times." It's the basis for the popular "Left Behind" novels in which some of us are saved and some of us are, well, left behind. There are strange beasts and people with swords coming out of their mouths and earthquakes and Death riding on a green horse. It's scary!

Maybe that's why, in the three-year cycle of Bible verses that churches use for preaching, Revelation only comes up in the regular readings in this year. Just a quick

appearance, a few weeks once every three years, and then we can go back to our more beloved passages.

But I feel like skipping Revelation – like I did so many years ago – is doing it, and us, a disservice. It *is* in the Bible, so we should spend a little time with it. But let's put some things in context first.

You may have heard it said that the Bible isn't really a book; it's a *library*. The Bible contains many different types of literature: poetry, law, history, biography, letters. God's word comes to us in many different forms – and not all of them are straightforward. The book of Revelation is an example of the type of literature we call *apocalyptic*. The word "apocalyptic," which comes from Greek, literally means "uncovering" – as in the uncovering of God's ultimate plan for the world. Apocalyptic writing is characterized by vivid and frightening images, symbols, combinations of numbers, and crisis. It is meant as an interpretation of the times in which it is written. And that's what we find in Revelation.

Revelation is a political tract for 1<sup>st</sup>-century Christians. It is proclamation, not prediction. Revelation may read like a horror story, but in its own way it does one thing: reinforce an old promise for new times.

In Revelation, everything old is new again. Almost three-fourths of the verses in Revelation refer to Old Testament passages. God says, "Look! I am making all things new!" And in fact, our passage today seems to echo the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we heard for our Call to Worship. And what we see through these passages is

that the end times are not about annihilation, as popular culture would have us believe, but about resurrection and renewal.

Revelation's writer is reminding us that God *will* overthrow the existing world order, an order that rewards empires that use war and commerce to oppress ordinary people. When we hear in verse 1 that the "sea was no more," this doesn't suggest God's hatred of creation. Instead it suggests the end of a system of oppression based on Rome's unjust domination of the Mediterranean and the people who live there.

In the new world order, God promises life-giving water for all who thirst – free of charge. In the new world order, God's dwelling is here with humankind! We are not raptured up to heaven. No! God comes *down* and lives with us!

The beginning, the middle, and the end of the Bible tell the *same story*. God wants to be with us! God walked among the mortals in the Garden of Eden. God came to earth in the form of the Son, Jesus Christ. And now, in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, God dwells with us. God is with us at the beginning and at the end. "Write this down," God says! "These words are trustworthy and true!...I am the beginning and the end!"

Revelation affirms some very old promises. Not only that God is with us, but that God is constantly creating and recreating. That God takes the old, the tired, the sad, the worn, and makes them **new**! Revelation reminds us that God is not in the past. God's actions and words are not over and done with. That we are not living in a time of stagnation.

No! We are living in a time of renewal! A time in which God is *still acting*! A time that is ripe for *change*!

But *new* is, by definition, different in some way. Change is scary. Maybe that's one reason why Revelation isn't the most popular book in the Bible. Revelation – *uncovering God's plan* – involves risk. But it's only through risking change that we can die to our old lives and live into a newness that goes beyond human imagination. Changing means letting some things go, and that can be painful. Former things will pass away, but God promises to wipe away our tears, giving us a future of hope and life.

This new world, the New Jerusalem as it's referred to in our passage today, isn't a place in the sky. It's not an escape. This new world is happening here, in this place, and it's happening *now*, in the present moment. God doesn't call us to be passive. God calls us to partner with God.

Pay attention to this vision that comes to us through Revelation. The vision of the New Jerusalem is an **urban** vision. It's not sheep fields or mountaintops. It's a *city*. If nothing else, this proclamation should renew our vision for urban ministry – for ministry right here in our neighborhood, in the city of Rochester.

The new world is a community, not a solitude. It is not about your personal salvation or eternal life but about how we as a community of humans can work with God to save the world. And we *can*. We, as Covenant, can partner with God and our fellow Christians to usher in the New Jerusalem. In fact, it is the *only* way we can usher in the New Jerusalem.

Already, the world as we once knew it is no more. All is new. We have yet to do away with pain and suffering, but through it all, the age-old promises of God are still there. God is the beginning, and God is the end. And God is everywhere in between.

Everything old isn't just old. It isn't dying or dead. Everything old is being born again. Everything old is being made new. Let's see what we can uncover through our own revelation experience with God.