



A Revelation of Hope

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

Third Sunday of Creation Season: Water~October 28, 2018

Genesis 21:8-19

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

Psalm 104:10-17

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| 10 You send the springs into the valleys; *
they flow between the mountains. | 14 You make grass grow for flocks and herds *
and plants to serve all people; |
| 11 All the beasts of the field drink their fill from them, *
and the wild asses quench their thirst. | 15 That they may bring forth food from the earth, *
and wine to gladden our hearts, |
| 12 Beside them the birds of the air make their nests *
and sing among the branches. | 16 Oil to make a cheerful countenance, *
and bread to strengthen the heart. |
| 13 You water the mountains from your dwelling on high; *
the earth is fully satisfied by the fruit of your works. | 17 The trees of the Holy One are full of sap, *
the cedars of Lebanon which God planted, |

Revelation 22:1-7

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 forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants[d] what must soon take place." "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

John 4: 1-15

Now when Jesus[a] learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had

gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most misunderstood, misread, and misused book in the Bible. One example of this is the dreadful Left Behind series, which popularized the notion of Revelation as a futuristic prophecy of doom and gloom with death and destruction for all, except for a few chosen “men”, and a picture of Jesus as a violent superhero who returns to inflict pain and damage on as many people as he can. It is a depiction that bears no resemblance to the Christ we encounter in the New Testament, or to the God of love we encounter in much of the Hebrew Scripture. It is true, there is violent and often bizarre imagery in Revelation—but it is equally true that it is a specific type of literature that uses coded, symbolic language to tell its story—common in the ancient world, but not in ours—making it ripe for misinterpretation. Revelation is not a futuristic prophecy but a description of the way things were at the time of its writing, with the Roman Empire at the height of its power. And the truth is that the Book holds a very different vision of the end of all of this—the end of the God project—than the popular imagination thinks it does.

Believed to be written by John of Patmos in the early 2nd century CE, Revelation is a description of the evils of Empire—the ways it and its systems of inequality and dehumanization pull us away from each other and from God. John, in a sense, is a doctor who has diagnosed the entire Roman system as monstrous, even Satanic, as it devours peoples and the whole of creation with its predatory economy. In writing, John is in effect saying to his readers, yes, our situation is as bad as you think it is, and worse.

I am guessing many of us can relate to this as we struggle within our own system of Empire. In an economy that is increasingly imbalanced with massive wealth concentrated in the hands of a few while millions struggle. In a culture in which, despite rhetoric to the contrary, white lives seem to matter a whole lot more than black lives or brown lives. And where anti-semitism is rearing its ugly head leading to the deaths of 11 people in a synagogue yesterday. Struggling in a system which views the earth as a big fat resource for us to use and whose non-human inhabitants, plant and animal, are expendable. A system where even water—that necessity of life that covers about 70% of the planet, is controlled by the few and distributed unequally. Only about 2.5 to 3% of the earth’s water is fresh and of that 3%, two-thirds is trapped in glaciers and snowfields and is not available for human consumption. As a result, freshwater—the stuff we drink, take showers in, makes up a very small fraction of all water on the planet. And our systems of empire have left the fraction that is drinkable polluted and unequally distributed—with the wealthy having enough to water lawns and wash cars, with some profiting from the sale of water, while others go thirsty or die from waterborne diseases. Just over 1 billion people in the world, many of them black and brown, do not have access to clean, safe water. And while we may think of sub-Saharan Africa, it is right here in our own nation—think Flint, Michigan. In the middle of the wealthiest country the world has ever seen, an entire city does not have drinkable water and has not for years. Climate disruption with increasing droughts, increased pollution, and an ever expanding human population have created a situation in which by 2025 two-thirds of the world’s population may face water shortages. This is a life and death issue for humans and for the planet. And because this planet is an expression of God’s own life, the damage we do to the planet, its inhabitants, to ourselves, breaks God’s heart.

For God created the rivers, oceans, lakes, and streams-incubators of life from the watery depths of the sea to the watery darkness of the womb. In the beginning it was over the water that God’s Spirit hovered bringing order from chaos. It was through water that God delivered the people Israel from slavery into freedom. Indeed, a river runs through the Bible, beginning east of Eden and flowing through the whole story of God and humans—ending with the river John writes about—the river of life flowing through a renewed earth. John, it turns out, had a twofold project as a doctor: he diagnosed the situation as terminal, and then he gave people medicine—a vision of hope. A vision rooted in this earth and its inhabitants, this planet and its water. John goes back to the beginning—to the garden, but with a twist. Because unlike the paradise of Eden, meant for two, the marvelous vision of which John writes is heaven come down to renew the earth. A vision of a holy city that is paradise for all—into which people stream from all over the world, reconciled with each other and with God. And at the center of it all are springs of water lined with trees with leaves of healing.

Despite the system of injustice and powerlessness in which they lived, Revelation invited Christians of its time to see themselves as full citizens of God’s holy city. After all their long days of backbreaking labor, after hearing judgment and intimidation all around them, this culminating vision gathered them together by God’s riverside, to drink at its water of life, and to find shelter beneath God’s majestic tree of life with its healing leaves. Revelation invited them and invites us to dream about our world in light of God’s story and God’s vision for the future.

The story makes it clear that some things need to be left outside the city’s walls: fear, domination, violence, injustice—all the ways of Empire, because in God’s city, there is no more violence, no inequality, no divisions, no

death—no kingdom but God's. In this city, God invites all to rest under the trees of life—twelve of them—enough for all—to eat its fruit, and be healed by its leaves. God invites all to wade into the water to be refreshed and revived. Invites all into a paradise of free, unlimited food, water, shelter, and healthcare!

Yes, our situation is dire—our waters are troubled, our planet is in peril. While there are things we each can do to conserve water—turn off the taps when brushing our teeth, take shorter showers, come to the raincheck event we are having here on Tuesday and sign up for a free rain barrel water collection system, they seem small and futile, though they do add up. But beyond these tangible things, we are called, as people of Christ, to proclaim to the world through our words and our lives the sure and certain hope that love and healing, not violence and destruction are God's vision for our world. Because the message of Revelation is one of transformation and justice, of ethics, not escape. It is a story that assures us, no matter what our situation, of God's love for us and for the world. A story in which God hangs out with us creatures on our turf, God's earth. Humanity, with our messy, fleshy, beautiful, problematic selves sharing the renewed earth with God Godself. So we must proclaim that matter matters and that this earth is precious to God, we must tell of God's rootedness in this world. And we who follow Christ must reclaim the Bible, not as a threat, but as God's love story to a world that God will not leave behind.

If John of Patmos were writing to the churches today to Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Kolcotta, Beijing, Lagos, and London he would tell us, yes, it is that bad, and worse—the systems of empire that destroy are strong. Yes, as Christians you must resist and overturn the interwoven systems of poverty, racism, and eco-injustice however and wherever you can. But as people of faith you must remember and tell the story of the lamb that is slain yet lives. Remember and tell that in God there is always hope. Because the end of the story of this beautiful planet, each of its inhabitants, no matter how bleak things look, no matter how strong a hold evil, destruction, and empire seem to have on the world, is an ending of love, justice, peace, reconciliation, and life completely and fully in the presence of the eternal love of God. In the meantime, here is the ending of a poem by Jewish poet Aurora Morales, Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining. So that we, and the children of our children's children may live

Amen.