

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, May 15, 2022**

**“A New Heaven and a New Earth”  
Revelation 21:1-6**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

The Book of Revelation can be profoundly disorienting, even bewildering. The theologian Joseph Mangina, who was also my PhD supervisor, writes: “If contemporary Christians think about Revelation at all, they are likely to think of it as among the most peculiar, not to say bizarre, books in the canon of Scripture. Revelation’s numbers and symbols are famously hard to decipher,” he writes, “its images violent, its picture of God oddly disturbing. The book has a deserved reputation for being a happy hunting ground for people with pet theories about contemporary politics and precise timetables concerning the end.” He notes how it’s “unfortunate that in the minds of many people, Revelation is associated exclusively with debates over end-time scenarios, often associated with particular political agendas and judgments.” But he adds: “In my own reading I try to take seriously the idea that [Revelation] is actually about the God of the gospel, the God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that just so it seeks to transform our lives in unpredictable and uncomfortable ways.” So this morning, let’s seek to learn something of God, and God’s actions, *and God’s promises*—as we encounter these visions of St. John the Divine.

Our Lesson is only six verses—but these six verses contain a stunning concentration of dreamlike imagery. We hear of “a new heaven and a new earth” (v. 1), and “the holy city [...] coming down out of heaven” (v. 2) like “a bride adorned for her husband” (v. 2), and “the one [...] seated on the throne,” “the Alpha and the Omega” (v. 6), and “the spring of the water of life” (v. 6).” Wow! With all these interlocking images, it’s hard to know where to start. Yet I suggest that one entry into this text is to look at absence and presence, what’s there and what’s not there (cf. Ferguson).

So first, an absence: our Lesson begins with a new creation, “a divine act of re-creation” (Mangina), a new beginning and a new start. John writes: “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*” (v. 1). Now why would a heavenly vision specify that the sea is absent? For Canadians, who were still wearing winter coats in May, sitting by a lake in the summer is one of those experiences we’re quite likely to describe as “heavenly”; so why, in this heavenly vision, does John make a point of saying that the sea will vanish in the world to come?

We may have fond feelings for oceans and lakes, but—in the world of the Bible, in the symbolism of the Old Testament—the sea represented the threats of *chaos and separation*. Today people routinely fly over the seas, in relative safety; we’ve mapped and explored the deep chasms of the oceans... But in the ancient near east, the sea—in its power and its mystery—came to symbolize a kind of “primordial chaos” (Bauckham, Heen) that “threaten[ed] to undo the goodness of God’s creation” (Heen).

So when John says that “the sea was no more” (v. 1), he declares that *the powers of chaos and destruction have been disempowered*, and will nevermore threaten the new creation (Bauckham). The new creation, John announces, won’t be like this one, subject to decay and chaos and destruction. As my supervisor, Prof. Mangina, put it: “The sea was no more,’ not because the ocean as such is cursed, but because the sea in Israel’s imagination represents chaos, darkness, the deep. Now chaos yields to cosmos, disorder to peace, death to life.”

And at the same time, the sea functioned in the ancient world as a daunting divider; today, on highways, we can cross rivers without even noticing, but—in the biblical imagination—water was a separation that was very difficult to cross. Think of the stories in the Old Testament, where God’s intervention was needed to cross bodies of water: the escape from Egypt in Exodus [14] or crossing the Jordan in Joshua [3]. And so, in the words of the late Rev. Dana Ferguson, a Presbyterian minister: “A powerful biblical symbol for chaos, the sea also represents what separates humans from one another.” She writes: “part of the beauty of this dry, new Jerusalem is that there are no stormy seas to separate people from one another. Here God and human beings live in harmonious relationship with one another.”

So first we see this absence, the absence of the sea; and second, we encounter a presence: “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” (v. 3). What makes the heavenly city heavenly is the presence of God: as the Presbyterian minister I just quoted put it, “The new heaven is plainly and simply the place where God is” (Ferguson). And the language that John uses to describe God’s presence in the heavenly city—this language draws on a long Scriptural tradition of God promising God’s presence to Israel. In the Book of Leviticus, we hear this promise: “I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (23:11-12); and in Ezekiel, we hear a similar promise: “My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (37:27; cf. Zechariah 8:8). So what we hear in Revelation, about God’s presence: this vision draws on God’s promise to dwell with God’s people Israel, and envisions the expansion of this promise—first and always to Israel, yet expanded also to include the nations, the *peoples* (καὶ αὐτοὶ λαοὶ αὐτοῦ ἔσονται [v. 3]), the church.

And in speaking about God’s presence, John’s language also evokes the event of incarnation, God’s dwelling among humankind in Christ. This doesn’t come across well in translation, but the language that John uses to describe God dwelling among humankind (Ἰδοὺ ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ σκηνώσει μετ’ αὐτῶν [v. 3]) is a somewhat peculiar wording suggests pitching a tent: God will, as it were, pitch a tent with the people. And we find the exact same root word in the beginning of John’s Gospel, a text often heard around Christmas: “And the Word became flesh and *lived* among us”—or, as it could be translated, “and pitched a tent among us” (Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν) (v. 14). It’s the same wording: as God became intimately and radically present in Christ, so will God be intimately and radically present in the heavenly city.

So we hear of the *absence* of the sea, symbolizing the end of the powers of chaos and separation that threaten us; then we hear of the *presence* of God, a promise that runs deep as the Scriptures promise that God will dwell fully and immediately with God’s creation as God

dwelt in Christ... Now with this absence and this presence, what is created? What does life look like, in the absence of chaos and separation, and in the presence of God who dwells in the city? In the absence of chaos and in the presence of God, we hear this dream of the world to come: God “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” (v. 4). In our world, in this first creation, chaos and destruction, separation and alienation, all these can threaten us and harm us—and very often, people may feel that God is far away indeed; yet not so in the new creation, the world to come, where chaos will be absent and God will be present and where there will therefore be no more place for weeping or mourning or pain.

The late Rev. Dana Ferguson, the Presbyterian minister I quoted before, she expresses wonderfully the significance of hearing this Lesson during Eastertide. She writes: “In the context of Easter season, this passage may be understood as providing strength and hope in desperate times. It is not a rosy description of heaven, leading hearers to say, ‘Oh, does that not look lovely,’ as they pass by a particularly attractive window and move on down the street. Instead, John offers us a vision we can sit down in front of, taking in all that he shows us about it. That way, when it is time for us to stand up again, we may be able to move on from whatever devastating place we have been, strengthened with the knowledge that something new lies ahead. With the vision of the new Jerusalem fixed in our minds—the place where the God we love and worship stands right beside us—we can continue walking until we arrive at that city where God makes God’s home among us.” Amen.