

Our Thirst for Living Water

Revelation 21:1-6

Fifth Sunday of Easter/ 19th May 2019

These hopeful words of Revelation 21 are often read at funerals, which is fitting and appropriate. Revelation 21 and 22, the last two chapters of the apocalypse or revelation given to John of Patmos, are full of hope; but this hope is not only reserved for the afterlife. We often limit the interpretative frame of this text. Yes, it promises deliverance from tears and death, and implies a reunion with all those who have gone on before us, but it's about so much more than this. New Testament scholar, Michael Gorman, friend of this church, reminds us that it's about "God's eschatological reality," that is, it's about the new thing that God is bringing into this world to redeem and restore and heal this world, not from the past, but from God's future, from the *eschaton* or end or future. And that eschatological reality which is on its way toward us, shaping our reality, is ultimate reality; it's that toward which everything is moving; it's that toward which we are being drawn. It's about "reconciliation among peoples," Gorman insists, "the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). And it's about more than individual salvation. "Revelation is, like the rest of the Bible, about the creation of a people, a people living in harmony with God, one another, and the entire creation."¹

This vision is no fantasy for John, it isn't wishful thinking or hollow hope. He *sees* it, he can see it coming. It's on the way, coming toward him, coming toward us. And what a vision it is. "Revelation's stunning final vision (21:1-22:5), full of scriptural images and allusions, impresses the reader," Gorman claims, "with its magnificence, beauty, and scope, not to mention its vivid sense of human flourishing before God, of true healing and life."²

And the place of human flourishing is not up in the sky somewhere, in the great by and by, but *here* in this world. A new heaven, and new earth are coming, the former things are passing away, behold, a new thing is on the horizon coming toward us: a new life, a new city, a new Jerusalem. "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3).

The Bible begins in Genesis in a garden, but ends in a city or, better, a garden-city, where the blessings of paradise will be restored, but this is [also] more than paradise regained. "As a city it fulfills humanity's desire to build out of nature a human place of human culture and community."³ This new garden-city is a place where people can live with peace and flourish. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away," (Rev. 21:5). Now, a verse like this can sound like fantasy or wishful thinking or a description of life beyond the grave. It can sound so unrealistic. Instead, John is seeing here deep into the heart of God, he sees what God intends for us and desires for us. It's about "the removal of all that prevents human flourishing in community before God and the presence of all that permits and promotes that human flourishing."⁴ It's about removing everything that hinders and hampers life in order to make a way for us to flourish, to thrive.

Human flourishing. The gospel, God's good news, from Genesis to Revelation is about life, the renewal of life, it's about reconciliation and resurrection, it's about transformation,

transforming people, healing our wayward, sin-bound, selfish hearts and turning them outward to neighbor, to the world, to God. Increasingly these days, I'm coming to believe the gospel, the witness of scripture, that it all comes down to life. Removing the things that hinder life to make way for life, itself. True life. With our Jewish sisters and brothers, we can lift our glasses and toast with them, "*L'chaim*," in Hebrew, "To life!" And did not Jesus say, "I have come that you have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10)? The Greek word for life, *zoë*, means full life, meaningful life, creative life, purposeful life, rich life, a life that flows, that moves, that grows, that is truly alive! Flourishing. It's Life—with a capital "L." That's what we hunger for, isn't it? Isn't it what we're thirsty for? It's about more than just existing, getting by. We want more than that. We want *real* life. The poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) alludes to this quest when he asked, "Where is the Life we have lost in living?"⁵

This theme is a strong current flowing through Scripture, and even beyond it. The Thursday Morning Bible Study is finishing up a study of an early Christian text known as the *Didache*, meaning "teaching" or "training." It dates from around 40-47 AD; so early, predating the Gospels and Paul's epistles.⁶ It's a training manual for how to move out of the pagan world into the fellowship of Jesus' followers, into the church. It's a fascinating window into the life and belief of early Christians, it's a remarkable text. Becoming a follower of Jesus was understood as moving out from the Way of Death and into the Way of Life, following the Way (who is Jesus) into the way that leads to life. The earliest followers of Jesus were not known as Christians, but as people of The Way (Acts 9:2). And initiates into the Way of Life joined the community—the *ekklesia*, the church—through baptism (as adults). It is striking that the *Didache* says that baptisms, if possible, should take place using flowing water—not stagnant water, not water in a font—but flowing, which means that they are to take place in a river or stream. And in the text, the Greek word used to describe "flowing" is actually *zoë* water; in other words, *living* water (Didache 7.1). We enter the Way of Life through living water.

In John 4, Jesus said, "...those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to life eternal" (4:14). Citing the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus describes the one who trusts in him: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (Jn. 7:38).

And that promise is carried over in Revelation, as John of Patmos heard Jesus say to him, "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" (Rev. 21:6). There it is again. The water of life. Life flowing through him; life flowing through him into us; life flowing through us and for us and for one another in the garden-city of this world.

These are marvelous words of comfort, assurance, and hope for the living of these days. We can rest knowing that our lives are situated in Christ, our Beginning and our End. Alive in that space between beginning and end, we are invited to thrive within the gracious embrace of his time. And Christ shares his life with us because he knows just how thirsty we are—thirsty for *true* life—a life that he gives freely

Isn't this what we're about as God's people? Isn't this what the Church is for? Isn't this what we're thirsty for? To be community, a people where God's Life can come alive in us, and

then for us to be a conduit of God's Life in the world. Aren't we called to be at work—*hard* at work—trying, striving, struggling to remove everything that hinders, obstructs, and destroys life in this world, everything that prevents God's children from living and flourishing? It's critical to know this, because the devious forces at work trying to devastate God's good creation, to undo God's intent for human flourishing are intense—and they seem to be getting stronger every day. The war drums are starting to beat again. Fear of the other, the stranger, the refugee is reaching a fevered pitch. Authoritarian leaders and governments that support them are on the rise. The old patriarchy is at it again attacking women—misogyny, wherever it is present (in both men and women) is, by definition, against all that makes for life. The Church can't afford to be silent in the face of all of this. The world can't afford the Church to be silent.

This is our work. This is our task. It comes with our baptism. This is our calling, both individually and together as the church. I'm mindful of this today as we welcome new members into this community, and as we celebrate with our graduates—for you have a responsibility, you are being called, summoned, to use your education, your gifts, your passions, your dreams, not to make lots of money, but as you live out your baptism, to help make this world a place where all God's children can flourish. You probably have no idea how you will do this, because none of us can see into the future. But we live within the Alpha and the Omega, and he offers living water. Go to him and he will show you the way.

It's fitting to close this morning with a prayer by Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the Roman Catholic Trappist monk, theologian, writer. He once prayed: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

We live alive within the Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End.

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 166.

² Gorman, 161.

³ Richard Bauckham, cited in Gorman, 164.

⁴ Gorman, 165.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"* (1934).

⁶ Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Michael Glazier, 2003).