

John Sampson
"A Different Way Home"
Text: Revelation 21:1 – 5
Preached at KVCC
March 29, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

In our reading this morning we've gone to the end of time.

According to a literal understanding of the book of Revelation, the images and scenes from the book are visions of a future to come, that is as true and real as the reality we inhabit in our own lives. These visions are an image of the end of history. And in this way of understanding the vision we are given in our reading this morning it is important to understand how we got here.

We start in the garden with the first humans. And you may remember we told this story as we opened our journey of Lent. There in the garden we meet the first humans, naked, unawakened, in deep communion with themselves, and with God, and with the Creation. And then as a result of following their own desire they fall out of Eden and into history. This history is marked by moments of brokenness and alienation, but also moments of redemption and forgiveness. And after millennia of history the book of Revelation tells us that God will enter into the stream of time and make a decisive set of actions that will overthrow the world as it is, and institute an eternal kingdom of peace.

And the reading we heard this morning tells us what this new, eternal peace will look like. And it is so important that we pay attention to what we are shown. It is so important that we, surround by a pandemic that is growing exponentially all around us, we who are losing our jobs, and the security of our investments, who can't buy all we need at the grocery store anymore, it is important that we understand the icon of the future that God, and our spiritual ancestors are sharing with us.

You see, God doesn't say that after she wipes away all of the brokenness of human history we'll go back to how it was, back to the garden of Eden, that we'll simply start again from ground zero. Because that is what I have heard many of us saying. "Oh, once the pandemic is over, things will get back to normal." Have you said that to yourself? Have you heard those around you say it?

We might be saying that, but God isn't saying it. There's something different happening in the image of God's perfected future. Yes, there are elements of the first garden there. The people in today's vision are at peace among themselves as they enter the New Jerusalem.

And God is there too, sharing her presence with all of humanity. And the trees of the garden are there too.

But there are other things in this garden that were never part of Eden. There is a city. And if you remember your Bible the first cities were build by hands bloodied with murder. And yet here is a city at the end of time. The humans are no longer homogenous, but of different nations and backgrounds. The diversity of human experience is embraced. The trees of the garden are there, but there is no longer a prohibition about eating of their fruit, and humans enter into the end of time fully awakened, without their ability to know good from bad having been erased.

This image of the perfected future is a hybrid of the best of the original garden, and the best of the experience of history.

This is what our spiritual ancestors tell us our future will be after the pandemic has past. It will not be a simple returning to a pre-pandemic, unawakened state. It will be a future that takes the best of what came before melded with the blessings of the road we are traveling right now.

When I imagine what I want to return to from the past. I imagine one of my favorite memories from last year's church bazaar. My family was here visiting and we came to eat lunch under a tent right on the front lawn of the church. We sat at a table with the Caners. I can still remember having a cheeseburger and coleslaw. It was an experience that was perfect on so many levels. It was an experience I look forward to having again.

What is it that you hunger for from the past that you want to bring with you into the future?

Now there are some many things about right now I don't want to take with me into the future: all of the death, the sickness, the economic uncertainty and vulnerability of so many, our elected officials telling those over 60 they should take one for the team and be willing to sacrifice their lives so that those who are younger can get back to work. All of this can be left in the past, left here on this Lenten road.

What would you like to leave behind from this moment?

But our tradition asks us to stop, and be still, and open the eyes of our hearts and look around us and see that in the midst of this moment there is also blessing; there are also things that are priceless, which we should carry into the future with us.

I'll tell you about something I've found that is priceless. Last Sunday when we were preparing for our first online worship ever I was watching the screen as people were joining our Zoom meeting. And I saw a number of people who I hadn't seen since the summer, or early fall. And at another point in worship I looked to see people sharing with each other jazz hands.

We have lived accepting the position that our church worship is only for people who can actually be in our sanctuary physically. We've accepted that if you're a seasonal person you'll just have to find another faith community to belong to for the rest of the year. Or if you are a person who simply can't leave the house on any given Sunday.

There's a member of our church who lives somewhere else for 8 or 9 months of the year. And she belongs to a church there, and she likes it. But she told me that her heart is here, that this is her church.

Why shouldn't we allow everyone, no matter where they find themselves, to be part of our church's Sunday worship from this point forward?

This is what we, as a congregation, are invited to take forward into the future when this pandemic is over. We are invited to take online worship into the future. We are invited to build a virtual sanctuary. We are invited to open our technological doors and invite all who would come to join us.

So, here we are, right in the middle of our Lenten journey, a journey that is filled with so many things we'd like to leave behind. But I ask you today to just every once in a while stop and be still, and see where the blessing of this moment is blossoming. And when you see it commit to bringing it into the future, a future which will be made better for it.

Amen.