

“A New World Is on the Way”
Revelation 21:1-6a
November 1, 2015, All Saints’ Day
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Imagine how it felt for John at Patmos, the island just off the coast of Asia Minor near to Ephesus and Corinth, member of a tiny movement on the fringe of a great empire, fragile church hanging on by its fingernails for life. At Patmos, John is given a vision. On that rocky island where there was little beauty one couldn’t imagine having a vision from God. But that is what happened as the curtain is raised upon the future, the last act of the play is revealed. Imagine his astonishment to see that, in the end, when the story is finally told and Christ’s work is done, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and I saw the holy city the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband ... and a voice said ‘See the throne of God is among mortals ...and he will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more ... mourning and dying will be no more.’ And at last the one seated on the throne said, ‘See I am making all things new.’”

And John says elsewhere in the book that you and I are marching in grand procession with the saints of all times and places, all tribes, and culture toward the throne. Take heart. You walk the path of discipleship not alone. A great multitude, people of God, walk with you.

That multitude of course, according to John, is the saints of all the ages past who are waiting around the throne of God. Today is All Saints’ Day when we remember those who have gone before us in our most immediate past, in our case here in the bulletin in the past year, and also those down through the history of humanity who have lived a life in faith and now we believe live eternally with God. Some ask, do saints include all of us? Or is sainthood reserved for those who have a special designation? It depends in part who you are talking to about the idea of saints. In some traditions there are specifically named people who have to have miracles attributed to them etc., others say all of the faithful who have died in the Lord are saints. Presbyterians would be in the latter category as not having specific people identified as saints.

I don’t know if you have been following the story out in California where a priest from the 16th century has been recommended for sainthood. In the Roman Catholic tradition one of the steps is “beautification” and Pope Frances celebrated that service in his recent visit to the United States. But some “native Americans” around San Francisco are upset because they say they have proof that the priest in question did some cruel things to their ancestors and are asking if that is true how can he be a saint? There are problems sometimes when you elevate people finite beings.

James C. Howell, a Methodist clergyman and part time professor at Duke wrote about saints, “The difference between saints and the rest of us is this: we get our lives organized over time; we have our commitments, our busy-ness, our work, playing tennis, socializing, tackling the mortgage, striving for a promotion, hauling the children to soccer. We aren’t evil; we may even be doing some good. But we are pretty much booked—and then we come to God and say, ‘Hmm, I have five minutes and five dollars left over. I want to be a Christian, so here God: I’ll give you what I’ve got left.’ Then we feel fairly noble: ‘I gave what I had left to God.’ But saints, Christian heroes, say, ‘God, it’s all yours. It’s all up for grabs. No prior commitment is sacred. Whatever you want me to do with all of my time, whatever you want me to do with all of my energy, whatever you want me to do with all of my possessions, my wealth, whatever it is that I have: God, it’s all yours. I hold nothing back for myself.’” (Howell, The Life We Claim, Abingdon, 2005, pg. 132)

Our text from Rev. 21 is short and simple. From the throne of heaven, Jesus says, “Behold, I make all things new.” And he does. Think about that: when Christ enters in your heart, your home, your hopes ...the hopes and fears of all the years are forever changed and forever new. He promises that as we begin a new month, as we turn our backs on October and enter the months of holiday and celebration with Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas. He offers today a new chance to begin again.

There are two sets of people I want to apply it to. First, the promise goes to those of you listening who want to do things new this holiday season. Don’t want to do the same celebrations the same way. Maybe you are tired of going to, is it too sacred to say, the same place you have celebrated the holidays for the last twenty years and maybe in the only future you can see for the next twenty. You are ready to start a new tradition in your family but don’t have the courage yet to declare that to whomever you need to tell. These last two months of the year can be a time for you to take stock of your life and the way you want to live it into 2016. Take the Christ by his word, “See, I can do all things new.” If your boat has drifted a little bit from the dock of your ideas and ideals, if the barnacles need to be scraped off the bottom, if you need to tune up the engine, sweep out the stateroom, polish up the wheel and get it going again in a new direction, this may be your time. If you are abusing yourself, if you are drifting away from what you believe, or if you have deserted your dreams, or if you have failed to spend time with your family, or if you are burdened by anger or unnecessary grudges, it is time to say, “See, I can do something new.”

To some it comes as a push; get up and go! There you were, happily curled up, comfortable and cozy, determined to live and let live, to love and laugh; and God said, “All right, it is time for another way.” And you argue, and dodge, and claim all sorts of personal immunities and exceptions, until finally, albeit grudgingly, you go. For no matter what your friends and family say, nor what your heart feels, something deeper and stronger and higher and wider, something you never know what to call but which as you experience it in the quiet of your own little world, is the voice of God, saying, “You have it too easy here, you are not doing it right. It is too comfortable. It is time to go.”

Secondly, it comes gently to those who are weary. If it came to some as a push, it goes to others as a promise. It can come to you perhaps as a balm in Gilead. If the first 10 months of the year tore you in two, if it was marred by some irreparable damage of death or disappointment or decrees this can be a new start for you, God guarantees it. If some crushing blow staggered you so that you had to blink your eyes to see it all, let alone determine which road was opened or which terrain was passable, there is another way for you now.

So, if you are sitting there wondering: “But what about me? Can I see something new just now?” If you are thinking: “I have an illness so acute I know it will not go away,” or, “I have had handicap for years, my handicap will never go away,” or “The doctor told me that my husband won’t be better ever,” or “My time is running out, and even God cannot make an old man young again.” You need to hear another message.

So I say it still, it is new if Christ is there. You do not grieve as if you had no hope, St. Paul added. You came out of the heritage of trust and hopefulness.

Christ knew a new day was beckoning. Christ knew “A new world was on the way.” Here at the very end of the last book of the Bible, here in Revelation 21 John caught the vision from his Lord himself, He caught what Jesus was about and was saying to all of us, not only to the mourners who were standing around wondering what was happening to their world filled with persecution from all sides—maybe what John saw in his vision of a new heaven and a new earth descending out of the clouds like a bride adorn for her husband was—describing the coming kingdom, the coming anti-structures, in which all pain and grief would be banished forever. And he said God would be in the midst of the saints and would “wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

This scene would also agree with the occasions when Jesus returned people from the dead, reuniting them with loved ones who had been grieving for them. Think of the wonderful story in Luke 7, of the time when Jesus and his disciples were entering the little town of Nain and met a funeral procession coming toward them. A young man had died, and his widowed mother was among the mourners. Jesus and his friends probably heard the clamor at a great distance because it was customary for the family of the departed one to grieve and if they could afford it, to hire others who would join them in loud sounds of lamentations as they carried the body to its final resting place. There was “a large crowd,” the text says; the noise would have been both heart-rending and earsplitting.

“Jesus had compassion on the mother and, over the din of the mourners, said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Imagine saying that to a mother crying for her only son as he is about to be buried. Then Jesus laid his hand on the bier, halting the bearers. ‘Young man,’ he said, addressing the corpse, ‘I say to you, rise!’ Imagine that too. What a crazy fellow! But the dead man sat up, just like that, and began speaking.

“Fear fell on all the people, says the text, ‘And they glorified God, saying, ‘God has looked favorable on his people!’” (Luke 7:7-17)

“Do you understand the theology of this? Jesus isn’t merely a powerful wonder-worker. He is the Son of the living God, whose act of raising a man from the dead is a foretaste of what the reign of God is about. When God, who through Christ visited his people for a moment, is enthroned among them forever, there will be no more death and separation. Mothers will no longer take their sons to the cemetery, or husbands their wives or citizens their friends. Death and mourning will be banished everlastingly, and there will be no more tears.” (Killinger, Letting God Bless You, Abingdon, pg. 50-51)

A new world is on the way and that is in part what it looks like. Are we preparing for it?

Whatever else beckons you in the days and weeks ahead, do not miss this. To all of us, it comes as a great promise that you can count on, it leads us to become something more than we are, to be ready to be made over and over, again and again in the image of God to be God’s saints marching in procession. “See, I am making all things new.”

Jesus says to us from the throne of heaven, “See, I can make all things new ... write this, for these words are trustworthy and true ... It is done! I am the alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” (Rev. 21:5-6a)