

The Culmination of All Things

Revelation 21:1-6

C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* was really the first book in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series. The final chapter was called "The End of All Things and the Beginning of All Things." That image applies in many ways to the scripture reading from the book of Revelation. It is the image of a "new heaven and new earth," of God living with us and wiping away all tears from our eyes, of no more death, and of our deepest thirst quenched by the waters of life. We can see this as metaphor for a life not bound by fear or limited by whatever pulls us down and keeps us from a life of abundance.

Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature, a written form of prophecy based on piercing the veil, seeing through deep mystery to mystical truth. Apocalyptic is a Greek word meaning *revelation*--to reveal, unveil or see things not known previously, things only knowable through the revelation. Apocalyptic writing is a highly symbolic and dramatic form of literature intended to challenge those who are comfortable in their power—often depicted as monsters or other vile creatures--to challenge them and to comfort people who are suffering. To us today, these words can encourage and stir us to action.

Apocalyptic literature came into Judaism from Persia during the Babylonian exile some 500 years before Jesus. Through the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, apocalyptic expectation was transferred to Judaism and became joined with the idea of an individual Messiah. That expectation was translated into Christianity and later to Islam. It was an expectation of a Messiah who would bring about the end of the age and it was at a fever pitch in Palestine at the time of Jesus and through the first century. It was also so much a part of how the story of Jesus was told in the Gospels.

Contrary to much popular theology and best-selling fiction today, the promise of the apocalyptic book we call Revelation has nothing to do with raptures of the saved or cataclysmic wars between the forces of good and of evil in any historical or physical way. Yes, there will almost always be wars and rumors of wars. There will be earthquakes and other natural disasters. There will be terrible suffering, cataclysmic events, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods or even a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The message of Revelation to its first readers at the end of the first century was simply this: in the midst of great suffering, great danger, and great fear the promise is that God is God. The end of all things, the heart of all things, and the destiny of all things lies in God's providence and there will be healing through God's presence. And this healing won't have to wait for some far distant future. This envisioned future is a present reality.

This passage from Revelation promises us, in the midst of our lives, our suffering, our dangers, and our fears, God is present with us and we are present with God. It's for us to learn to trust that God is, God heals, and God loves. It's for us to come to count on this promise of new creation in which God will wipe away all tears from our eyes, in which death will be no more, in which water from the spring of life will be given to all who are thirsty. The vision of Revelation describes life not limited by the power of fear over us, but only of hope within us, life not constrained by messages of "you can't," but empowered by the proclamation, "you are already."

This vision of life as new creation is reflected in the song lyric by Peter Mayer:

When I was a boy, each week on Sunday,
we would go to church
and pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
and consecrate the holy bread
and everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now
This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse
It made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
how things have changed since then
Everything is holy now
It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now
(“Holy Now” by Peter Mayer)

these lyrics represent another vision that call us to embrace a hope of God with us and us in God--a world in which “everything is holy now.” What difference would it make for you if it were true that everything is holy?

So if we trust such a vision of the promise and nature of a new creation, then what can we do to help make that promise come true? Well, I'm glad you asked! We can give ourselves to the work of comforting those in grief and of changing a status quo that perpetuates sorrow especially on the part of the most vulnerable among us: children, the elderly, the poor, and the marginalized. We can share with others our hope that physical death is not the end of our story, but a new birth, a transition and the beginning of all things. And we can work to see that people do not die needlessly, that they don't die in coal mines because safety laws are not enforced. We can work to see that people don't die needlessly in wars that did not have to happen because there is no will or creativity to pursue peace and find non-violent resolution to conflict.

We can give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name to those who are thirsty and we can change policies and practices that keep sending clean water to those who already have more than they need and keep it from those who don't have enough. We can also prepare ourselves for those times in our lives when our own tears inevitably flow--when death in its many forms comes to us and those we love, and when the wellsprings feeding our lives begin to run dry--each of us can appropriate the promises of God's new creation. After all, it's for us.

But we need to spend time to tune in to the divine presence within ourselves and within each person, and respect that presence in all of life. We need to invest ourselves in the community of this congregation by seeking out new relationships with people here. Talk with someone you don't know very well in order to strengthen relationships and find a place of service that nourishes you – maybe a work group. Perhaps you will want to get involved in an organization

like More² or some other aspect of the ongoing work of Crossroads Church. This year, invest in the ongoing work of this congregation by giving generously of the money you can give, by inviting some friends to come with you here to find a welcoming community.

We sing a song here at Crossroads called "Heaven Is in My Heart." Its theme is more than a nice feeling about possessing the promises of God. It is an assertion that we can make by faith—like the writer of Revelation--that heaven is God's very presence here and now with us and among us.

The Christian Church at the end of the first century was suffering terribly. People were killed for their faith, forced to recant, or at least keep quiet and pretend they didn't follow Christ. The vision of Revelation was meant to give them hope and comfort. Most of us today don't suffer such brutality, not in the same way, but we experience pressures of other kinds that push or pull us away from that quality of life we hear promised by Jesus through the Gospels.

To live abundantly is a life not ruled by our fear and a life that makes a difference. The vision of a new heaven and a new earth is still given to us: the promise of sorrows comforted, the fear of death confronted and removed, and the dryness of life's tension and confusion washed away in the waters of new hope. This vision waits for us to see it. This promise waits for us to claim it.