

Sermon - 5th Sunday in Easter – 2 May 2010
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
by Rev. Emily Martin

Revelation 21:1-8

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.

²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them as their God;
they will be God’s peoples, and God, God’s own self will be with them;
⁴God 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.”

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said,
“See, I am making all things new.”
Also [...], “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶Then [the one on the throne] said to me, “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.

⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things,
and I will be their God and they will be my [beloved heirs].

⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted,
the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers,
the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake
that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

It may not surprise you to know that the lectionary stops with verse six. For that matter, so does our stained glass window over there. You can see John on the island of Patmos with the vision of the new Jerusalem descending from Heaven, all aglow with the light of perfection.

Anybody see the lake that burns with fire and sulfur? Anybody? It seems that our stained glass is in agreement with the lectionary. Heaven is so much nicer without stinky old verse eight. Isn't it?

The first time I encountered verse eight was in South Africa. I was all set up to start doing AIDS education as part of an evangelical prison ministry program, when this Baptist minister from South Carolina had to go and ruin everything by leading a bible study on the responsibility of fathers to keep evil people like homosexuals away from their children. Given the role of gay Christians in my own conversion and call to ministry, I felt compelled to at least insist that this pastor not indiscriminately label a whole group of people as evil. After all, I told him, "Some of the most faithful Christians I know are gay."

You'd have thought I'd taken a match and lit his personal Bible on fire. They called him "small Paul," but that was meant to be ironic, he was at least a foot taller than me, and huge. He whipped that Bible open and turned right to Revelation 21, verse 8, in all its fiery, sulphuric fury, its condemnation of those "bad people." He pointed to that verse, and said, "Do you believe that this is the Word of God? Do you?"

What would you have said?

Do you believe that this is the Word of God? It was actually a really good question. And if he hadn't been foaming at the mouth, we probably could have had a really good discussion about what exactly we mean when we say something is the Word of God.

I knew, in the moment, that if I were going to be a minister and that if he and I were going to have any kind of meaningful conversation about our faith that it was really important that my answer to that question be yes. But I also sensed that my “yes” would most certainly mean something different from his “yes.”

And to be honest, while I could say “yes” to the Bible as a whole containing the Word of God, I wasn’t so sure about that particular verse. Or a whole lot of other verses, for that matter. But I sure wasn’t going to get into that with “Small Paul.” That was exactly what he was accusing me of—a lukewarm faith that picks and chooses which rules to follow, that fashions an image of God that I’m comfortable with—that only comforts and never challenges—to heck with what the Bible actually says.

He was right. I was picking and choosing my texts. I didn’t trust Scripture—its authors or compilers, to be accurate communicators verse by verse of God’s Word. Verse five says, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” It’s as if the author knows that the Bible’s authority won’t be taken for granted by everyone.

When I was a chaplain at the Metro State Women’s prison in Atlanta, one of my assignments was to visit the inmates in the infirmary. One of the women I visited regularly was Mattie Bird. She was confined to her bed with a broken hip, and it was clear from the smell in her room that the nurses did not make changing her diaper or bed sheets a priority.

It didn’t help her cause any that she had a reputation for being demanding, ungrateful, and just plain mean. The nurses told me that during the night, she would yell at the top of her lungs. When they couldn’t stand it anymore, a nurse or the officer on duty would come in and give her a piece of their mind or they might take away her store privileges as punishment. And she would yell right back at them.

I tried asking Mattie once how she got to be in prison in the first place, and the most I got was that she'd violated her parole—it was a subject she didn't seem to want to talk about.

She much preferred to talk about her various pains, infections, and bodily functions. Sometimes I think she was trying to see just how long her green chaplain would hang in there—how much I or maybe even God could stand before abandoning her—leaving her to lie in her own filth and misery like everyone else seemed content to do.

Mattie's other favorite thing was to ask me to read to her from Revelation. Maybe she sensed my squeamishness about that text too, and was just pushing the same buttons from a different angle. Time and again, she would ask for Revelation 20 or 21, and time and again I would start with these first six verses in chapter 21, and then skip down to the lovely description of the new Jerusalem in verse 9. And why wouldn't I? These verses, especially the first six, have some of the most comforting words in scripture.

So why weren't they enough for Mattie? My supervisor suggested that I relinquish my self-appointed job as Biblical editor and consider that Mattie might know exactly what she needs to hear, and that it might not be what I think she needs.

Convinced that reading verse eight aloud to Mattie could only end badly, nevertheless, the next time the request came, I didn't stop after verse six. I kept reading: "Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my [beloved heirs]. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers—."

"That's it," she said, "that's what they keep telling me. That I'm a murderer and I'm going to Hell. Is that true? I've asked God to forgive me. Is that true?"

And so this verse—this horrible verse that talks about a place of unspeakable suffering—something that seems so contrary to a God who prides herself in being slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love—this horrible verse opened the door for a discussion of God’s character and God’s promises. Is it true that God hates murder and lies and idolatry and cowardice and that there is absolutely no place for these in God’s kingdom? Yes. Absolutely yes.

If all you are is a murderer, a liar, a coward, an idolator, then this text is not good news. But is it true that “murderer” is all that you are, Mattie Bird, child of God? No. Absolutely not. These words too are trustworthy and true. Jesus said that no father, if their child asks for bread, will give them a stone. No mother, if their child asks for fish, will give them a snake instead. So then if you, child of God, ask God for forgiveness, God will not give you a lake of fire and sulfur. That is not the God who gave up his life for us in Jesus Christ.

If I had my way, the assurance of pardon would be the same words of scripture every Sunday. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ. And Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life is gone. A new life is begun. Friends, know that you are forgiven, and be at peace.

Mattie opened the door for me to believe that these words in scripture are trustworthy and true—even verse eight! They can be good news, even if they make me squirm like you would not believe.

I think Mattie needed that verse because it made her confront what she already knew and feared—that what she’d done was wrong and that there was no place for that in God’s kingdom.

And we need to hear that too. That some things are not acceptable. That God's grace does not mean that anything goes. That sexual abuse and violence are not ok with God. That the exploitation of poor people is not ok with God. That lying to your investors or your clients or your spouse is not ok with God. That promoting racism and cruelty in the guise of immigration reform is not ok. That being careless with the earth and its resources is not ok. That making money or knowledge or success or comfort or other people's approval more important than God is not ok. And that these things have consequences, real consequences that cannot simply be avoided or ignored.

Just because we have not pulled the trigger on a gun, doesn't mean that we are not also guilty of murder, by our lifestyle and priorities, by the ways that we participate in unjust economic, social, and political systems, by the way we bleed each other dry with a thousand little cuts.

And maybe what verse eight reminds us of is that we cannot ignore or gloss over those things in our lives, in our communities, in our nation that separate us from God and one another. That if we are to truly know God, we have to know God in all God's justice as well as God's mercy.

Justice and mercy may sometimes feel like a paradox, but I find that it is often the paradox in scripture that makes it ring true, that makes it a living word, that makes it relevant to so many people in so many different situations. Even in these first six verses—it is the paradox that speaks to me.

This text in Revelation depicts a god who is both infinitely powerful—the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end—but also heartbreakingly tender. This god can both destroy death—destroy death! and also personally wipe every tear from our eyes.

It doesn't get much more intimate than that—God's hands cupping your face, God's thumb wiping away the salty trail. This god is unimaginably above us, yet chooses to dwell with us. This God meets our deepest and most basic needs, not with some Band-Aid or drug to cover up or mask our pain but with water that brings life. Abundant & eternal life.

If that is not good news, I don't know what is.

The true power of this text is in the seeming paradox of God's all-mightiness and God's tenderness. We long for a God who is bigger than all the evil in the world, who is bigger than any of our doubts, who is bigger than any mess we might find ourselves stuck in, who is bigger than death itself. But we also need a god who, like a faithful spouse, who like a committed partner, will touch us, will walk with us. We need a god who knows us inside and out and who loves us not only in spite of that but because of that. The god in this text is all of that and more.

The god in this text is the Alpha and the Omega, the source of all language, all communication, all knowledge, and yet a source that folds itself into an alphabet, into words, into something that we can relate to—stories and songs and prayers; prophecy, testimony and advice. This all mighty God, who is our beginning and end, is always reaching out to us. In the Word written and proclaimed, in the Word made flesh, the Word that continues to nourish us even now in the bread broken and the cup shared. And nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of this God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.