

The Promise of the New

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Revelation 21:1-6 and John 13:31-35

This morning in Buffalo, I have minister friends who are preaching and praying, trying to make sense of a heartbreaking and inexplicable and infuriating shooting, driven by racial hatred, that took innocent lives. This morning in Milwaukee, I have minister friends who are preaching and praying, trying to make sense of a heartbreaking and inexplicable and infuriating shooting that broke out as a large crowd watched a basketball game. I am hopeful that thoughts and prayers, which matter, will lead to action, that will make a difference.

The theatrical world lost a potential legend when I answered the call to go to seminary. My future on the stage was so very bright. In high school, I played Ado Annie's father in "Oklahoma." I had a solo: "The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends." And they should. "One man likes to push a plow; the other likes to chase a cow, but that's no reason why they can't be friends." Think about it. I even had a little dance sequence. I was such a fine dancer that, eventually, the director suggested that I stand still while the other dancers moved around me. Yes, I was *that* good.

In college, a friend, a theater major, recruited me for a scene for one of his classes. "The Enemy of the People," by Ibsen. My major challenge was in memorizing my lines, which was a problem. However, I still remember the pivotal line. In a tense debate between the two leads, my character said, "The people don't need new ideas; the people are much better off with their old ideas." That was the end of my theatrical career. Even now, more than 30 years later, when we call each other, even before saying hello, I will greet my friend, very dramatically: "The people don't need new ideas; the people are much better off with their old ideas."

And perhaps we think that, about many things. Nostalgia about the nation, the world, the church. If we could only go back. Simpler times, that might never have been quite so simple. Better times, that might not have actually been all that good, and certainly not for everyone. Some old ideas, yes. "We hold these truths." "Ask not what your country can do for you." "Love your neighbor." "Let justice roll down." But not every old idea, or at least not what we've done with every old idea. Nostalgia will take us only so far.

Though I was raised in the church, went to Sunday school and church every Sunday, youth group, confirmation class, youth retreats and national Presbyterian gatherings, was elected as an elder when I was 17, and all of the other things that now seem in retrospect slightly, maybe

even overly, church-y, I cannot say that I was familiar with the Bible when I landed at seminary. Not by a long shot. Church, I knew. The Bible, not so much. The Bible seemed to me then, and might seem now, as something distant and mysterious, best left to the scholars to figure out, the professionals, or perhaps, the religious fanatics.

That's a mistake. If we learned anything from the Reformation of 500 years ago it is that the Bible is the people's book, accessible to us. Every time a minister or theologian tells you something about the Bible that doesn't seem quite right, or that conflicts with something you hold deep in your heart, don't believe it. Check it out. The Bible is meant to be opened, not closed. It serves as a guidebook, not a rulebook. It is meant to be contended with, not blindly assented to. You may not like everything in it, or agree with everything in it, or understand everything in it. But you will miss something if you do not engage it, and you will profit when you do.

When I served on a denominational task force, we spent some time thinking about how to engage, how to approach, the Bible. We were, our denomination, fighting over many things then; now, not so much. How we approached the Bible in general, and applied it to particular matters, was an important discussion. We landed on a principle, or, rather, re-articulated an old principle. If a text, or an interpretation, does not lead you more closely to an understanding of God as a God of love, and our task being that of loving God, and God's world, and God's people, then look again. The rule of love, we called it. Love. New, and old. Old, and new.

Still, that Bible. If our general experience with the Bible is hands-off and keep your distance, then that's especially true with the Book of Revelation. Our culture, and perhaps our church, links Revelation with prognosticators of doom who equate mysterious language and images with modern day political happenings or global events. *These seven things equal those seven things, the experts say, or that force of evil then equals this force of evil now.* That has been true in the Cold War era, or the nuclear era, or the Y2K frenzy – remember that? – and is now true as geo-political forces are at work, still out there, that somehow war in Ukraine, for example, is fulfilling biblical prophecy. It is not.

Or, another point on the spectrum, people who do look at Revelation try to dismiss the sense of urgency and impending doom with which the writer, a man named John, John of Patmos, considered the condition of the world. He couldn't have meant what he wrote, some say – it is too scary, too fantastic.

Read Revelation, perhaps this afternoon after working in the garden and you've rehydrated and taken a few Advil. If you are like many who simply ignore the last book in the Bible because it is either mysterious or controversial or confusing, read it, and be edified. It contains neither the ravings of a lunatic nor the pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking of a dreamer. It contains a vision, sometimes mystical, even apocalyptic, likely written by an imprisoned follower and believer who used grand and sometimes difficult images to proclaim how things were and imagine how they might be. And it contains words of encouragement and challenge to churches, fledgling

churches, who are seeking to discern what it means to live in the world and give witness in an environment that is sometimes hostile, sometimes indifferent, sometimes both.

John envisioned the church at war *in* the world *with* the world. That is where it may be different for us. Our culture, at least in this country, does not persecute us for practicing our faith, nor prevent us from participating. But even now, we live in a conflicted world, and we are engaged in a heightening debate about what it means to practice faith in the world, or how faith gives form to our public life, and what competing visions of that look like.

So read Revelation. You might be confused, or angered. But you will also be provoked, and challenged, and perhaps even inspired. Because what you will find is exactly what we need – an alternative way of looking at life, at the world, then the ways that life, or the world, or culture, would have us understand. An alternative way, a new way.

And if we hang in there through Revelation we will discover some of the most beautiful language and imagery and hope in all of the Bible. A vision of a new and holy city. A beautiful river. Life and light and peace and joy. All things new. A new heaven and new earth. A promise that suffering and tears and even death will be no more.

How on earth can we leave that vision to the experts or prophets of doom? How on earth can we not embrace that vision and seek to live into it and seek to build it, with God, right now? A new heaven and a new earth.

After two years of cancellations and online events, my Facebook feed is overflowing with prom pictures – everyone looks fabulous – and commencement pictures – everyone looks relieved. I have been privileged to hear more than a few commencement addresses. Most are not memorable. A few jokes. Thanks to the people who supported you along the way. A wry comment about tuition payments, or the applicability of that philosophy degree. A few pithy platitudes. Perhaps a reference to Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” Or Journey – “Don’t Stop Believin’.”

Invariably, each address will contain two points. This is not the ending, but a beginning. And you are not the future; you are the present. Both are true.

New heaven and new earth. A new commandment. All things new.

We read the Bible and are perplexed by issues of time. There are points when all of God’s plans seem destined to unfold in the future – as in the dramatic images from Revelation. There are other times when it is clear – as in Jesus’ commands to his followers – that the new thing is beginning now. We are to love one another, now, live into the new commandment, now.

As in most things, this seems to be a “both-and” situation rather than an “either-or” one. We live in hope for the future, and we live in determination for the present, believing that God’s agenda of transformation and renewal is for the present moment and every moment. And we live like it. We live as if God is working in the here-and-now, because God is. And we live as if God is working in the yet-to-be, because God is.

Doug Bratt writes that John the Revelator “makes a subtle shift in verb tenses when he reports that the One who sits on the heavenly throne...is “*making* everything new...(we learn) what the victorious Christ is trying to tell John about what God is *already* doing when the apostle sees this startling vision.” Not God *will make* all things new; God is making all things new. Already. Now.

How, in fact, might Revelation 21’s vision of the future actually reflect what God is currently “making new”? And how might the Holy Spirit use John’s glorious vision to help shape the lives of God’s dearly beloved people in response to that gracious work?

While the heavy lifting is on God, we, too, are invited into the transformation and renewal business. Because we have been loved, we are called to love. Because God will wipe tears away, we are called to do the same – our own, when that difficult moment comes, but more so the tears of those we love and for whom we are called to care.

It seems clear what newness the world needs: war, racism, poverty, deep division between groups of people, environmental threats. It is not always so clear how we will get there, but it is clear that we *are* called to get there, or rather to cooperate with God who is leading us there. Or what newness is needed in our own lives: newness of body, or spirit, or living, or relationship.

Beverly Gaventa writes that this vision of a new heaven and a new earth is a “blessing that enables God’s people to live in God’s very presence.” In God’s presence, she writes, all separation is over, including the separation of grief and loss. We are offered comfort, but we are also called to faithfulness and endurance. (*Texts for Preaching, Year C*, pages 308-309)

What is your vision? What would your city look like, your new heaven, your new earth? Revelation calls us to dream, to imagine, to envision. And not just to dream, to imagine, to envision, but to live and work and pray and move toward that vision, with God, here, now.

Look around. Discern. Pay attention. What things need to be new? Your vision is yours; mine is mine. What is our common vision? What new thing is God doing? And how are we working with God to make it happen? What would this holy city, this new heaven and new earth, look like?

I am about to do a new thing, God. I am making all things new. How can we believe that, not in some distant hereafter but now – in this time and space, in this moment, in this life. New...now. Amen.