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The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 19, 2019

Lectionary Year C:  
Acts 11:1-18  
Revelation 21:1-6  
John 13:31-35  
Psalm 148

### **Heaven comes down**

There is a church in Atlanta that is known for its stained glass. Huge stained-glass windows line each wall—or at least they seem huge to a young person. Up above, at the zenith of the east-facing wall over the altar, depicted in this beautiful stained glass, is a picture of heaven. The streets are paved with gold. Silver castles stand tall in the distance. Clouds billow at the corner of the window. If the sermon was boring, or the service was dragging, a person could sit there and put them together, the Biblical scenes on either side pointing to the depiction of heaven up above.

There is good scriptural warrant for that kind of depiction. If I was in charge of depicting heaven, I don't know what I would do except, I guess, for something like that. It's easy to scoff at the simplicity and maybe literalism of such pictures, but they serve their own religious purpose: among other things, we see that whatever heaven is, gold and silver are the least precious things there—you can use them to build roads and construct houses.

There is a different depiction of heaven in the book of Revelation. It is not contradictory, exactly, just different. In Revelation we hear about the throne of God the Father, which is kind of obscure and hazy, somewhat mysterious. (God the Father never speaks in Revelation, except through his Word.) We hear about the Lamb, looking like it had been slain, yet very much alive and very much in charge. We hear about the animals, the elders, and martyrs, and the thousands upon thousands of angels, all offering their service of worship. Even more than its visual description, however, we are told what heaven sounds like: a lot of singing, hymns of praise being sung to God.

Not so down below, of course, in the book of Revelation. What John sees happening down there are various calamities, various acts of destruction, with plagues and pestilences, the literal fire and brimstone, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and so forth. When we read about those things, which can be quite awful, it is important that we realize that these are not necessarily—certainly not only—descriptions of future events, some terrible things that will be unleashed on the earth through the wrath of God. The destruction, the calamities, the pain and suffering, described therein are Revelation's description of the world as it is, now, and how it has ever been, since the advent of sin in the world. Wars and rumors of wars; indifference to other's suffering; war and more war: John is showing us how things that happen down here on earth are relevant to God in heaven and the Lamb. The world it describes is our world.

This is important to remember. This aspect of Revelation isn't a prediction of the future, or at least isn't only a prediction of the future. It is a mirror held up to our own society. We might ask: what would it look like if the four horsemen of the apocalypse were unleashed on the earth? It might look a lot like constant war; it might look like communities ravaged by drug use, which others profit off of; it might look like the unceasing oppression of the poor; and so forth. This is our world.

Revelation describes it in a strange, fantastical way, but make no mistake: Revelation is showing us our selves.

But it also showing us something else. It shows us that this kind of world is not forever. There is another world coming. It's true that the descriptions of worldly antagonism get more and more intense as the book goes along, until they reach a fever pitch toward the end. At the same time, though, the depictions of heavenly solace, divine consolation, get more emphatic as well. Last week's reading was from the seventh chapter of Revelation, with its promise of the poor hungry hungering no more, the suffering are suffering no more, its promise that God will wipe away every tear from every eye. This is beautiful stuff, and it was tied in with the good shepherd imagery from last week's readings. But just as the antagonism gets more intense as we move along in Revelation, those promises become more intensive as well. In our reading today, later in the book, the heavenly promise is not only that the people won't suffer, but that suffering altogether, death altogether—Biblically, the source of all suffering—will be no more. The very possibility of suffering and pain will be abolished.

This is the source of that strange comment by John in the first sentence of today's reading: "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." Why would the sea be no more? Is there no going to the beach in heaven? No, it's because the Hebrews were terrified of the sea: it was dark and unruly; it was the source of all chaos and disorder. In Genesis, one of the acts of creation is God ordering the waters, bringing them under control. It's why God's most important act in the Old Testament is separating the waters of the Red Sea to bring the Hebrews through it in safety, with "unmoistened foot."<sup>1</sup> This is also why, when Jesus walks on the water, the people say, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (Matthew 8:27). It is evidence for Jesus' divinity. The sea is terrible for the Hebrews, so John is given the revelation that, when the new world comes, the sea will be no more. Everything will be calm, ordered, and safe. Chaos will be banished; death will be destroyed. The sea will be no more.

But there is more of God's promises. In this new world, we will see that "the home of God is with mortals." It's strange to talk about God having a "home." But if by grace God takes a home, then we can now say that in the fullness of time it will not be far away, in divine isolation. It will be among God's people. God isn't remote. God will be fully present.

This is the case partly already. We know that God is present fully in Christ, and Christ is present fully in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and in the community of Christians gathered. But, in the future, God will be present in a new and more immediate way. But not yet.

This is what Jesus tells his disciples in today's gospel reading. At the Last Supper, with his betrayal at hand, his crucifixion within sight, he says to his disciples, "Where I am going, you cannot come." Where is he going? He is going through the pain of death, into the land of light and life, to where John the Divine sees him when he gets whisked up to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the throne of God. He is going there, to be in the Father's very presence. But they cannot go there, not yet.

But the home of God is with his people. Therefore, Christ isn't going to stay far off, at a remove from the world. He is going to come back. And when he does, he will bring with him the New Jerusalem. John gets a preview of it: the New Jerusalem that is coming.

This is a wild idea, and it's a place where the stained glass window of the clouds and streets of gold fall short. In Revelation, in the fullness of time, we don't go up to heaven, and leave the

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<sup>1</sup> "Come, ye faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness! God hath brought his Israel into joy from sadness: loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters; led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters." Hymn 199 in the Hymnal 1982. Text from John of Damascus, 8th cent., translated by the brilliant John Mason Neale, 1842-1900.

world as we know it behind. At the end of Revelation, at the climax of the entire Bible, heaven comes down. In the moment of cosmic fulfillment, the climax of Scripture, heaven comes here, and the home of God is with mortals, and where God is, there is no suffering, and no cruelty, because there is no sin, and there is no death, and there is no war, and there is no oppression of the poor. That world comes here.

This means that “here” is important. The world matters. What we do in the world matters. It isn’t something we leave behind. So in the meantime, our time, the middle time between the end of the Gospel of John and the end of the book of Revelation, the time between the promise of “no more tears” and its fulfillment, you and I are left with the “new commandment.” The commandment not just to love one’s neighbor as oneself, but to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Lots of religions say to love one’s neighbor as oneself, or something like it. It is a good instruction. We should all do it. But not very many say to love one another in the same manner as a person who laid down his life for others, who laid down his life for people who hated him. The apostle Paul says, “While we were yet enemies of God, Christ died for the ungodly.” Love like that.

Love is an action, in the New Testament, not primarily an emotion. For the New Testament, what love looks like is Christ on the cross. Love one another like that, Jesus is saying. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son: love like that. Wash the feet of your sisters and brothers: love like that. Go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor: love like that. Realize what Peter realized in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles: that God’s beloved community encompasses the entire world, not just those who look like us or live like us.

Love like that so that when the New Jerusalem comes down, with the Lamb, we will be found ready. Ready to live in the New Jerusalem, ready to live alongside God. He is coming.

This is what we’re left with, as the entire Bible comes to its climax: God coming to a world that has been left with the new commandment: love one another as Christ has loved us and does love us. Revelation is a wild and crazy ride, like the Bible as a whole is a wild and crazy ride. But it leaves us with this: there is suffering in the world, but there won’t always be. God may seem far away, but he’s not, and one day soon you’ll see him, face to face. In the meantime, love one another. In the meantime, love one another as Christ loves us.