"The Christian Hope" part 1 of 3:

"God Comes Down"

Revelation 21:1-6

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

We're going to spend today and the next two Sundays looking at the final two chapters in the entire Bible, chapters 21 and 22 in the book of the Revelation to John. I'll tell you right now what the main point of these two chapters is: *hope*. They are fundamentally, at the most basic level, about *hope*. The Bible ends with a message of *hope*. The Christian story ends with a message of *hope*. Hope is just dripping throughout these two chapters. It's the end result of everything God does. God gives us *hope*.

Let me also say right up front that the Bible didn't *have* to end this way. The book of Revelation almost didn't make it into the Bible. Indeed, its status as a legitimate book of the Bible is still not fully accepted in some parts of Eastern Christianity, and it is the only book of the New Testament that is not read in the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. There was a lot of disagreement, back in the fourth century, about whether it should be included in the biblical canon, and disagreement again in the sixteenth century during the Protestant Reformation. In the fourth century, a bishop and theologian named Cyril of Jerusalem – who is today venerated as a saint by Roman Catholics and others – identified *twenty-six* books which belong in the New Testament. Our New Testament has twenty-seven books. What book did Cyril omit? The book of Revelation. He believed that Revelation, and several other Christian books that are not included in our present-day Bibles, were of "secondary rank." Another bishop from about the same time, a historian named Eusebius of Caesarea, recorded that some Christians included Revelation as one of the "accepted writings," while others considered it "rejected" or "not genuine." He didn't give his own opinion on the matter; he simply records that Revelation's status was disputed by reputable Christian theologians. But another bishop and theologian, Athanasius of Alexandria, recognized as canonical the 27 books that are included in our New Testament today. Three decades later, another bishop and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, also recognized those same 27 books. That became the prevailing view, and by the fifth century most branches of the Christian Church included the book of Revelation in the New Testament. But a fifth-century New Testament that was produced for Syrian churches did not include Revelation or several other books, and the Armenian Church didn't accept the book of Revelation as a legitimate part of the Bible until about the year 1200!

Then, in the sixteenth century, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther called Revelation "neither apostolic nor prophetic." Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, called it "not a book of the Bible," and the French reformer John Calvin, who is basically the founder of our Presbyterian tradition, wrote lengthy commentaries on every single book of the New Testament, *except* Revelation. So if things had gone just *a little bit* differently, the book would not be in our Bible, and most of you would never have heard of it!

So imagine if the detractors had won. Imagine a Bible without the book of Revelation. Imagine a different ending … an ending without these two chapters … without a profound message of *hope*.

And what is this hope? What is there in these two chapters that gives us such profound hope? Let's start with this: "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." John, the writer, has spent many pages describing, in vivid detail, a vision he experienced while he was living in exile on a Greek island in the Aegean Sea. There were, periodically, persecutions of Christians back then; it was a marginal religion, feared and distrusted by many, and some rulers perceived it as a threat or an affront to their power. The vision that John received gave him hope during one of those persecutions, and he wrote it all down to give other Christians hope as well. Over the course of the vision, seven seals are broken; the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are unleashed; there are earthquakes, fire, hail, plagues, and other calamities; a third of humanity is wiped out; a woman "clothed with a white robe" gives birth to a son; a great dragon throws down a third of the stars in the sky; the archangel Michael battles the dragon and casts it and its angels out of heaven; the dragon pursues the woman, but she escapes, and the dragon wages war on her children, "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus"; a great beast emerges from the earth, which many people follow; heaven opens, and a white horse appears, whose rider is called "Faithful and True" and "the Word of God"; then, finally, after a great deal of tribulation, the dragon and the beast are cast into a lake of fire, along with every wicked person on earth.

That's what precedes these final two chapters. So far the vision has included a tremendous amount of devastation, and has generated massive fear for the people on earth. Imagine *living* through all of that! Imagine *enduring* all of that! If that's the future, it doesn't sound all that *hopeful*, does it?

But here's the thing. The vision attests to the reality of *evil*. There are people – and forces – out there that do not live from a good heart. People who do really *unspeakable* things. Right now, at home, we're reading a book about the Holocaust. Not the first book about the Holocaust I've ever read, but it is reminding me once again of just how devoted to *evil* some people truly are. They were created in the image of God, they have a spark of the divine within them, but circumstances in their lives, and choices they have made, have so twisted them, perverted them away from God's design for them, that their works are filled with more darkness than light, more hatred than love, more evil than good. In the world we live in, people are persecuted, hunted, harassed, beaten down, taken advantage of, beaten, robbed, abused, tortured, murdered – the list goes on and on and on. What the book of Revelation is trying to say is this: *God is going to <u>do</u> something about all of that*. About all of that – *and even more*.

"Then," says John, *after all of that*, "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." The world we live in is *not* the world as God intended it to be. God had envisioned a *garden* of peace and tranquility. What emerged instead was a world filled with jealousy, hate, prejudice, racism, and so much more. This world, filled with such evil, will not exist forever. *God is going to change it*. There will be a *new* creation. A *beautiful* creation.

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." I'll have a lot to say about that "holy city, the new Jerusalem," next week. For now, just notice this: this holy city is *beautiful*, like "a bride adorned for her husband." We all know how much money is devoted to wedding attire. With few exceptions, couples getting married want to look *their very best*. So this new city is as beautifully furnished as you can possibly imagine. And what's more: it *comes down*. It comes "down out of heaven from God." God *gives* it to us. Just the

same way God came down when Jesus was born on this earth, it's a *gift* that God is freely giving to us. We don't have to climb up to God. God comes down to *us*, to where *we are*. God comes down *here*.

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." God's home isn't *up there*. God lives *right here*. "The home of God is *among mortals*." God is here, with us, now, in this room, and also *wherever* you go. At home. At work. At school. In the marketplace. At the grocery store. In the stadiums. At the concerts. Even in online spaces. "He will dwell with them." There is nowhere you can go to escape from God's presence. "They will be his peoples" – plural, *peoples*, not "people," which is what some translations say; I checked the original Greek; it is most definitely plural. *Peoples*. A whole bunch of different *peoples*. "God himself will be with them and be their God." All people everywhere – all *peoples* everywhere – can call upon this God. Doesn't matter what you look like, what your gender is, what continent your ancestors hailed from, who you love – *all* people have access to this God.

God "will wipe every tear from their eyes." *Every* tear. All the reasons in the world why people cry. When there's pain. When there's suffering. Mourning. Injustice. Rejection. When there's *evil*. *All* the reasons why people cry will *cease to exist*. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." God will get rid of *all* of that. "The first things have passed away." The things that *we* have to deal with. God will save what is good and *eliminate* the rest. God loves us *that much*.

"And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" *All* things. Some things don't need to change very much. Some things are already pretty good. The beauty of creation, for example. But in the new creation, *everything* will be good. All that is bad in this world will be gone. Even within us. Those parts of us that aren't very holy, that aren't very good, that hurt other people, or ourselves – *those parts of us will also be gone*. We're not going to do evil any more. We won't even *be able* to do evil. *Our very natures will change.* For "God is making all things new." And John, utterly dumbfounded as this vision unfolds, is too flabbergasted to keep writing. He's just staring in *awe*. So the voice from the throne says to him: "Write this! For these words are trustworthy and true." John was so awestruck that he had to be reminded to *write this down* so that other Christians and future generations *and folk like us* could see what he was seeing. A magnificent new world. A gleaming, beautiful world, filled with pristine goodness, and not a *single shred* of pain or suffering or evil.

"It is done!" proclaims the voice from the throne. "I am the Alpha and the Omega" – the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, as if to say, "I am the A and the Z," meaning that God compasses *everything*, from first to last, "the Beginning and the End." The end of the story will not be the evil and suffering and pain that the worst of humanity brings out. The end of the story will be *goodness* and *pleasure* and *peace*. *We're* not the ones who are going to bring that about in the long run, although we certainly have a lot to do in the short term. The one who's going to fix it all in the *long* run is *God*.

"To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." God comes down. Many of us are *thirsty*. Some people in this world are *literally* thirsty, desperately in need of physical sustenance. Other people are thirsty in a different way. Jesus put it like this: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Whatever it is that you need – freedom from suffering, freedom from disease, freedom from pain, freedom from depression, freedom from mental illness, freedom from prejudice, freedom from racism, freedom from evil, freedom even from *death* – God *will* provide. For God comes down. God comes down *to us*. God comes down … *to you.*

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