

“Loving Our Way to a New Heaven and Earth”

May 15, 2022

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Many of the writers of the Bible seem to have a preoccupation with the idea of a new heaven and new earth. We find it in Isaiah and some of the other prophets; some of Paul's writing in the New Testament alludes to it, as well as one of the letters from Peter. But in Revelation it really becomes dominant. Why is that? Why this desire for a new heaven and earth?

Last month at the annual Abraham Table held by the Muslim community during Ramadan, the speaker, a woman from Journey's End Refugee Services, shared a poem by one of the women they've helped. It was a beautiful and powerful poem that said, in essence, people don't leave their country because things are good. Parents don't uproot their children and leave their communities to risk the dangers of traveling hundreds or thousands of miles to a place where they don't know the language or the customs or even have connections when things at home are peaceful and safe. The poet said refugees live in the mouth of a shark. They have no other choice.

Longing for a new homeland only happens when the place you're living has become intolerable. And by the same token books like Revelation are only written when life in society has become impossible. It's written by someone who is what the great theologian Howard Thurman called “the disinherited,” someone he says whose back is against the wall. It's from the experience of being left out and despised that a desire for a new heaven and earth comes.

The Church hasn't always appreciated that. Again, as Thurman reminds us in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, “It cannot be denied that too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed—this, despite the gospel.” Too often we've interpreted words like these in Revelation to be a desire to leave the world altogether. We've proclaimed an escapist theology that says our highest purpose is to be rid of the world. But that's not at all what's being said. The writer of Revelation isn't interested in leaving the world; he wants to see the world transformed. And not just the world but the whole creation itself.

It's hard for those of us whose lives are comfortable, whose backs aren't against the wall, to relate to that need. But it's a reality for billions of people on the planet, so it's a reality we must face. And for those who follow Jesus facing it means more than merely acknowledging its existence; it means taking hold of it and making the reality of those who are hurting, those whose backs are against the wall, our own reality.

That's what Jesus is talking about when he says he's about to be glorified. That strange word salad we're given as he starts sharing with the remaining disciples, after Judas has left, is

easy to dismiss because it's so confusing. But when Jesus talks about God being glorified in him, he's talking about his crucifixion. And Jesus' crucifixion is precisely how God enters the reality of human suffering.

We don't really know much about the society in which the writer of Revelation lived. We know it was rigidly stratified and religious behavior was probably regulated tightly. We don't know if the writer was a victim of persecution but he was apparently exiled. He seems to have been aware that this movement was a threat to the society and to the authority of its rulers. He believed that in spite of appearances to the contrary the rule of Caesar would eventually end and God would be in command. Until then he encourages believers to remain faithful, to stay committed to the gospel of love and compassion and to the lordship of Jesus.

The Christian movement attracted many of those society rejected or forgot. There were some wealthy people, too, but by and large it was a movement of poor people. So, it was made up of folks who were used to being targets of mistreatment and injustice. As New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza points out, "the author of Revelation had adopted the 'perspective from below' and expressed the experiences of those who were powerless, poor, and in constant fear of denunciation." The message of a new heaven and earth offered them hope that could sustain them through their difficulties.

We need that hope now more than ever, I think. After the horrifying events yesterday in Buffalo, when innocent people were targeted and killed for no reason other than the color of their skin. Black Americans know what it's like to live powerless and in constant fear of denunciation. White supremacy in this country has been allowed to thrive by the silence, in part, of white churches "on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed." We are guilty of tolerating, most of the time tacitly but sometimes openly, a way of thinking that debases people of color. That tolerance has given room to hateful ideas and led to terrible acts of violence.

I hate saying that. I hate the idea that I have contributed, however unwittingly, to an environment of bigotry. But I know I have. I haven't spoken when I should have. I haven't made the effort to reach out to people of color and build relationships of love. I've done nothing to make a new heaven and earth a reality. The writer of Revelation says to just hang in there and wait for God to come down. But Jesus says something different. Jesus says love one another. And not just love in general, but love one another as he has loved us.

How does Jesus love us? He relinquishes his privilege and power to serve others. He enters the world's suffering by going to the cross. That's how we love our way to a new heaven and earth. We're called to follow Jesus, to make his way, the way of compassion and justice, our way. That's how the world is transformed. It doesn't happen through legislation or committees or political parties. It happens through relationships of love that reach past all the ridiculous excuses we make to keep ourselves divided and embrace others as sisters and brothers whose lives we cherish and whose dignity we honor.

That doesn't sound so hard to do; it seems so obvious, but somehow we keep resisting it. The new heaven and earth we long for may not be something we can achieve entirely on our own

but without our willingness to love I don't see us accepting it from God. We have work to do if we want to see our world transformed. God is making all things new; may it start with us.

Amen