

“Not As the World Gives”  
May 25, 2025  
Scripture: Revelation 22:1-5; John 14:23-29

What would you say is the biggest threat to faith? I think the biblical answer to that is usually fear. That’s why there are so many uses of the phrase “do not fear” in the Bible. It’s uncertain how many times that phrase is used. I found when I googled it 365 came up, but that’s not accurate. But it does occur a lot, and usually in circumstances that are especially challenging. Fear has a way of taking control of our lives unlike any other emotion, I think. On the one hand it can paralyze us and shut down our capacity to think creatively, and on the other it can compel us to take action that is often harmful to ourselves and to those around us. Fear is the greatest enemy of faith.

The book of Revelation, part of whose last chapter we just heard, can be summarized with the phrase, “do not fear.” It’s written to people who are beleaguered and feeling under siege. There’s not much evidence that the government of Rome was actively persecuting Christians at the time it’s written, but that’s on the horizon and the author can see it coming. Revelation is a mind-boggling piece of literature, full of symbolism and metaphor and even coded language that can be confusing to modern readers. This letter is part of a genre of writing called “apocalyptic,” which was very popular in that world. Its purpose was to encourage people living in fear to hold tight to their faith and trust in God’s power ultimately to win against their enemies and redeem them.

In addition to encouragement, this type of writing, according to one scholar, “also served as protest literature. [It was] a protest against the prevailing worldview of the dominant culture. Apocalyptic writers encouraged their readers not to accept the beliefs and lifestyles of the world around them, but to remain true to their own convictions.” When you’re a small community with very little power or control over the course of your own life, remaining true to your own convictions can be very hard to do. So, even if they weren’t being actively targeted for discrimination, they were being bombarded by forces calling on them to conform. In their society that conformity would have been to the state religion of Rome that claimed Caesar as an object for worship and built an infrastructure to support Roman dominance and enforce Roman control.

So, that’s the world where the writer of Revelation lived. It’s a little different from the world of the writer of John’s gospel, but still under Roman control with a lot of the same pressures and demands. When Jesus tells the disciples he is giving them his peace, but not as the world gives, he means the world of Roman dominance. Rome also claimed to give peace, but a peace enforced through violence and coercion. Jesus offers a different kind of peace. He offers the peace that comes through justice and compassion. Rome’s peace leads to division and fear. Jesus’ peace leads to wholeness and faith.

We can think of this final vision from Revelation as a sort of tableau or diorama of the peace Jesus gives his followers. It’s meant to convey abundance and healing, an end to conflict and despair, when everyone will have all they need to thrive and no one is rejected or left out. That kind of vision is sprinkled all through the Bible. We hear it expressed in the creation story

of Genesis and in many of the prophets' words, such as Isaiah and Micah. And Jesus' own ministry embodies that vision in a direct way through what he teaches and his acts of healing. Finally, it comes to fruition in his resurrection, as he becomes in Paul's words, "the first fruits of those who have died."

Over and over the vision we're given, then, is a world that is a contrast to the world in which the writers and readers of scripture actually lived. It's not a fantasy or a pipedream. It represents the deep desire of people throughout history for justice, compassion and peace. And it springs from the longings of people who are the most vulnerable in those societies. Whether it's ancient Israel enslaved by Pharaoh or in exile in Babylon or it's the struggling early Church in a hostile Roman world where they have no power to influence their rulers or their neighbors, the vision of wholeness persists.

In other words, no matter how fearful or hopeless their circumstances seem, their faith survives and they keep holding onto that vision, a vision of peace that comes from God and not as the world gives.

Last week I attended a conference at Duke Divinity School hosted by their Center for Reconciliation. For three days we explored different dimensions of reconciliation as it is found expressed in scripture. Our first day was spent with the question: "Reconciliation toward what end?" We used the vision of a new creation found in Isaiah and Colossians as a guide and we considered where evidence of that new creation can be found in the world around us. One thing I found confirmed is the belief that God's new creation doesn't occur spontaneously without our cooperation. If we want to see God's new creation in the world around us, we need to do the work to manifest it. One of our speakers challenged us to take the description of the "New Jerusalem" in Revelation and imagine what a "new Atlanta" or "new Los Angeles" or "new Buffalo" could look like. And how do we get there; how do we move in that direction.

For instance, I was introduced to the concept of "sacrifice zones" in many cities where industrial waste is allowed to accumulate through dumping in neighborhoods where the poorest people live. The effects on health and well-being are devastating. We have a history of that in our area with Love Canal and the West Valley Demonstration Project, a nuclear waste cleanup site south of Buffalo. In a world where that kind of neglect is allowed to go on, who can bear witness to the new creation? It's left to us. We're called to speak out on behalf of those whose lives are damaged by the actions of indifferent authorities. One suggestion was to work on creating "sacred zones" in our communities to heal the damage that's been done and bring us closer to God's vision.

Another dimension we explored was around the need for lament, acknowledging what's gone wrong and our complicity in causing harm to others. The week I was there was especially poignant for me because it was the third anniversary of the Tops massacre in Buffalo. Part of our lament over that atrocity was how it exposed the inequities that still exist in our community. Through decades of red-lining and exclusion we've created a segregated population on Buffalo's eastside that made an easy target for someone looking to do terrible harm. That's what the world gives, the world we have built. Before we can envision an alternative we have to go through the hard work of lament. One way we can do that is to be "empathetic witnesses" for those who are

harmful. Empathetic witness has three pillars: affective, we identify emotionally with victims of injustice; cognitive, we seek to understand the underlying causes of injustice; and conative, engaging in actions that provide meaningful support for victims of injustice. So lament isn't a static exercise, it's intended to lead us toward action, toward making change.

If our hope is to embrace fully the peace Jesus gives, a peace that is lasting and whole, then we have work to do. These visions the writers of scripture offer aren't meant to be distractions for our entertainment. The vision of a new heaven and new earth where the river of life flows to bring abundance and healing is meant to give us hope in this world for something new. We're being offered, over and over in scripture, an alternative to the world we've constructed by neglect and default. God's vision for us is meant to be pursued with intention and mindfulness. Rather than passively accepting what the world gives, we're called to do the hard work of living into God's vision and bringing it to life.

As people of faith we are God's instruments to bring hope to the world. We are God's representatives to bring justice and peace. When we hold God's vision before us and put our trust in the peace Christ gives, we can change the world around us and reveal God's new creation. So, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.

Amen