



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A New Heaven and a New Earth Revelation 21:1-8 Fr. William Klock

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Brothers and Sisters, think back to Moses. Think of Moses in the wilderness, leading that ragtag column of refugees from Egypt. Moses, a Hebrew—and he knew it—but raised a prince in Pharaoh’s court. He knew the finest luxuries the world of that day could offer. His mother must have told him about the God of Israel, but Moses grew up worshiping the gods of Egypt. If there is anyone in the Bible who knew the enticements of the present age, it was Moses. In St. John’s day the great whore, symbolically called “Babylon”, was Rome with her gods, her caesars, her power, her wealth, and her luxuries, but Moses knew the whore when she was called “Egypt”. Dressed in her finery, her cup full of wine, she announced that the present age is not only fine—it’s what the world is supposed to be—if only you’ll invest yourself in it. Her gods and kings will pour out their power and riches on you. I expect Moses believe it all. And then he killed that Egyptian slavemaster and was forced to flee into the wilderness. And there he met—*really* met—the Lord, the God of Israel, and learned that there was someone greater and something better. In faith—and sometimes doubting—he went back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh—to confront the whore and the beast and his false prophets—and to lead his people out of their bondage. And he saw the might and the wonders of the Lord, as the Lord up-ended the whore’s chalice and revealed the wine inside to be filth and corruption.

You would think the plagues, the chariots at the bottom of the sea, the pillar of fire, the lightning on Mount

Sinai, water from the rock, and manna and quails would be enough to sustain the faith of Israel. But forty years in the wilderness is a very long time. Hungry bellies, a monotonous diet, not having a real home, living in the scrub in tents, regularly being raided by enemies—those things can wear down a people’s faith, even as they experienced the Lord’s daily provision and presence in their midst. The concerns of the present have a tendency to overshadow the memory of the great things the Lord has done in the past. Brothers and Sisters, we think that if only the Lord would give a great sign, well, that would put an end to our struggles to be faithful. But consider all Israel had seen—and even as the people grumbled, they lived with the indescribable glory cloud in their midst, in the tabernacle. And Israel wondered—and I suspect Moses wondered along with them—is this wilderness all we’ll ever know? And so, as Israel camped on the plains of Moab, the Lord took Moses to the top of Mount Pisgah, and there he could see the promised land spread out below him. And he knew. The wilderness was not forever. The Lord’s promises are real and true. The promised land awaited—even though he would never set foot in it himself. And that put the wilderness and all its troubles in perspective. Moses would later ascend that mountain again to die, but he died knowing that the life he and his people had lived in the wilderness was not in vain.

In verse 10 of Revelation 21 John writes that angel carried him away to a great high mountain to show him the New Jerusalem. It’s a Moses-on-Mount-Pisgah moment. And as Moses reported what he’d seen from the mountaintop to Joshua and the Israelites, so John sends a report of his vision to those beleaguered Christians of Asia Minor. They already knew rejection and opposition, some were facing persecution—John, himself, was currently in exile—but soon the real test of their faith was coming and many of them would die. Again, the concerns of the present often

overshadow the memory of the Lord’s mighty deeds in the past. It’s easy to forget the sacrifice of the cross, it’s easy to forget the significance of the empty tomb, it’s easy to forget that Jesus is Lord when your own livelihood or even your own life is on the line. It’s easy to compromise with the gods and kings of the present age when they hold out promises of riches and luxuries and power—or even just a simple life of being left alone. The Israelites were hungry and found themselves longing for the fleshpots of Egypt more than the milk and honey of the promised land. They knew the fleshpots. The milk and honey were only a promise. And so, like Moses, John sees the promised land and he writes to the churches to remind them that faithfulness to Jesus, even though it means life in the wilderness today, is absolutely worth it. Once you’ve seen the New Jerusalem, you will never be seduced by the cheap imitation of glory offered by the whore.

Look at Revelation 21:1.

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.

How do you even describe such a thing? The Israelites knew the beauty and fertility and plenty of Egypt. Even after a lifetime in the desert, they could visualize another land of plenty the other side of the Jordan. But a new heaven and a new earth? We haven’t even seen the present heaven! How are we supposed to visualize a new one? A new earth might be easier since we’ve known the present one, but even that’s hard. We can think back to the garden, before our sin corrupted and made a mess of everything. Or we can think of Jesus resurrected from the dead. His body brought back to life, still bearing its scars, and yet even with those scars, it was made perfect. He was unrecognizable, yet familiar to the disciple all at the same time. And even they, when they told the story, seem to have given up trying to

explain it—it was just Jesus, the same, but new, the old, but better. It was Jesus truly alive in a way they'd never seen anyone alive before. And so John uses a bunch of familiar images of change and transformation to convey what a new heaven and new earth mean. In verse 2 it's like a wedding. Life is never the same after you get married. In verse 3 it's like God moving into your house. Life's never the same after something like that either. In verse 4 it's like being healed from a terrible hurt or a devastating illness. And in verse 7 it's like being adopted into a new family or, maybe, being born again. "I will be his God and he will be my son." Again, a drastic and life-changing transformation. John didn't have the vocabulary to describe this new heaven and earth so he points to all these experiences that change our lives and says, "It's kind of like that, but only more so—more than you can imagine, but trust me, because I've seen it."

The first thing he noticed was that, as he puts it, there was no more sea. Don't worry. I know, we live on an Island, and apart from the expensive ferry trips, we love the sea. The new heaven and earth would hardly be an improvement if the sea were literally gone. Remember, John writes in symbols and in Hebrew thinking the Lord created by bringing order to chaos and the sea was the last remaining bit of that original chaos. It was the home of monsters like leviathan. The Lord was sovereign over it, but if God's ordered creation is good, the sea was the root and source of the bad. Chaos came from the sea to disrupt the order that makes Creation good. The first thing about this new creation is that it has been purified. The satan and his angels and everyone who had not given allegiance to Jesus has been wiped from the face of creation and cast into the lake of fire and now the Lord's creation project is finally completed. The last bit of chaos is tamed. There

is no longer a source of corruption, of evil, of rebellion.

John goes on now in verses 2-7:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

There's that first image of the bride and the wedding. Remember I said last week that John had already seen the city as the satan and his hordes laid siege to it. The city is the Church. It is already but it's also not yet. Like everything else, it's already here, but imperfect, and one day she will be made perfect by being made new. So there's a sense in which the present age is the age in which the bride processes down the aisle to meet her Lord. There are so many images John uses in Revelation. We see the church, riding out to battle with Jesus, conquering the world by the proclamation of the gospel until the whole world is brought into submission to him. And at the same time we see the bride making her way down the aisle to meet Jesus—and with each step she becomes more

beautiful, her dress whiter and purer. But John's holding a kaleidoscope to our eyes, because the bride is also a city and that city descends from heaven and, at the same time, both the city and the people are revealed to be God's temple.

One of the reasons we struggle with John's imagery is that the idea of "going to heaven when we die" is so deeply ingrained in our minds as the end goal of everything. We think of heaven as the perfect world and the earth—and our physical bodies—as shabby shadows of something greater that we'll be glad to leave behind. That idea came from Plato, the Greek philosopher, not the Bible. But because of it, the very ideas of resurrection and new creation have been scrambled for a lot of people. For many "resurrection" means leaving the body behind to live a spiritual existence in heaven, and "new creation" has been forgotten altogether. But remember the story. Remember the beginning. God created this world and he called it good. He created human beings from the dust—we are mortal—and yet he declared us to be not only good, but very good. Adam and Eve's vocation was to steward that creation—specifically the garden, where the Lord dwelled with them. And think about what that means. The garden was the Lord's temple. Adam and Eve were his priests. And they were given a mandate: be fruitful and multiply. They were to care for the temple and the natural implication of their fruitfulness *would have been* the expansion of that garden-temple into the whole earth. In some way humanity was called to join with the Lord in the completion of his creation. But we rebelled and we made a mess of everything. We were cast out of the Lord's presence. But the great story of the Bible, from beginning to end, show us that God has not given up. Not on us and not on this world. He will complete his great project. He will bring the story to the wonderful ending he had planned all along. No

devil, no forbidden fruit, no human rebellion will get in the way.

But sometimes, as we plod through the wilderness it feels as though the wilderness is all there is and that it will be forever. So John takes us to the mountain top and shows us the promised land. He shows us Creation set to rights—and he shows us the Church—because how often is it this very body of the redeemed that’s a mess, ugly, hurtful, unfaithful—he shows us the Church finally perfected and set to rights too: the beautiful bride, the golden city. God’s good, but corrupted creation is somehow made new—both earth and heaven. Why does heaven have to be made anew, too? Because even it has seen corruption. As John saw back in Chapter 12: there was war in heaven. The problem began there, with the satan. Even heaven must be set to rights. And human sin having been dealt with by Jesus, God’s realm and ours will once again be reunited as they were in the beginning. As the voice from the throne—God himself—announces: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” The word John uses when he writes about “dwelling” is the word associated with the tabernacle—that one place in Israel where heaven and earth overlapped, where human beings could go to meet the Lord. It’s the same word John uses in the first chapter of his Gospel when he says that the word became flesh and “dwelt” among us. In Jesus, God “pitched his tent”, he “tabernacled” in the midst of his people. And remember what John said about that? He says that we beheld his glory. And what John sees now at the end—which isn’t really the end, but the beginning—is what God did in Jesus on a cosmic scale. His creation set to rights, his temple restored, the people he created restored to his presence, and that project he gave to Adam and Eve to join with him in the completing of his

creation, if not itself completed, at least once again back on track. It’s what Paul wrote about in Ephesians: that God has “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10).

And speaking of Paul, I think we can better understand why John sees the city descending from heaven if we think about what Paul has written in Colossians 3. He writes, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” If we are in Christ, there is a new life that awaits us, a life now hidden with him in heaven. Tom Wright has a wonderful illustration of this. Think of Christmas. All year your decorations are stored away in a closet or in the attic. You buy presents for your kids and hide them away, again in that closet or the attic or under the bed. But when Christmas comes, we don’t bring our families together and cram ourselves into the closet or squeeze under the bed to enjoy Christmas. No. The celebration is gradually prepared and waits for us in the closet, but when the day comes, out it all comes and the whole house is transformed. And just so with God’s new creation and the life that Jesus has waiting for us. On that day every tear will be wiped away. There will be no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain, and no more death. It will be a celebration of which Christmas is a shabby shadow. Everything God has in store for us, everything Jesus has been preparing since his ascension to heaven, all of it will be brought out. Heaven and earth will be rejoined—which is a dramatic way of saying that God will restore us to his presence—and we will know new creation by the power of his Spirit. We will know God as the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, and we will know that life-giving water that Jesus’ promised in John’s gospel—the life that Adam and Eve knew in the

garden, the life that flowed in rivers from God’s presence to nourish the world. The angel placed at the entrance of the garden to guard it with his sword will be no more. In the end the Lord welcomes us back, but now the garden has become a great city—somehow new creation, while it’s purged of all corruption, will benefit and reflect the good that has come through even fallen human life. But the garden is still there, at the heart—there’s the tree of life and the river of living water.

And, finally, John reminds us why he’s written all of this. As Moses was told to tell Joshua what he’d seen on the mountain so that he and the Israelites would not lose heart, so John writes to the Christians of what we might call his diocese. Tribulation was coming, but they needed to persevere. The kingdom is real. “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son,” God says. The one who conquers. The one who stands firm in faith, on the truth of the good news about Jesus: crucified, risen, and Lord of all. The one who does not compromise with Caesar or his gods. And he also warns in verse 8:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

We’ve already seen that as he makes all things new, the Lord will wipe from creation every bit that doesn’t belong: every bit of evil, every bit of rebellion, every bit of sin—and every last person who has not given their allegiance in faith to Jesus and to this kingdom. Brothers and Sisters, this is what it means to live in faith: to give our allegiance to Jesus and to live for him, to live according to the values of his new world, even as the kings and gods of the old world offer their cheap

imitations and rage at us in anger when we refuse them, because we trust there really is a promised land and that Jesus and the Spirit will get us there in the end. The people who have shown their commitment to Jesus by remaining faithful to the end will be welcomed as God's sons and daughters, the brothers and sisters of Jesus his son, and they will know once again the tree of life and the river of living water. Having lived in faith and hope, looking forward and committed to God's new world, they will know life in his presence and he will himself, tenderly wipe away all our tears.

In a sermon preached in 1941 at St. Mary's, Oxford, C. S. Lewis gave us that famous illustration of the distractions of the present age:

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Dear Friends, we have no excuse. John has shown us Jesus and all his glory—glory as of the only son of the Father. He has stood on the mountain and seen the glories that lie in wait for those who are in Jesus the Messiah. And, like Moses, who reported what he saw to encourage and strengthen Joshua and the Israelites through the wilderness and the conquest to come, John has shown us—something even greater than a holiday at the sea. But as we go out to conquer, we have more than John's report. We each have known the power of the cross for ourselves. We have known the life of the Spirit into whom we were plunged in our baptism. We have come every

week to the Lord's Table to share in the bread and the wine and to participate for ourselves in that great exodus from sin and death in which Jesus leads us. Set aside the mud pies. Forsake the old kings and the old gods. Do not fear the wilderness. On the other side lies the promised land and the life of the age to come. As Joshua declared, knowing the Lord's promises and his faithfulness, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Brothers and Sisters, stand firm in faith knowing that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, we thank you for the new life you have given us in Jesus and the Spirit, but we also acknowledge our struggles as we make our way through the wilderness. Too often we are enticed by the lures of the old and distracted from the promises of the new. Strengthen our faith we pray. Remind us that the life of the Spirit you have given us in our baptism is but a down payment on the life of the age to come. As we come to your Table, remind us that Jesus has delivered us from the bondage of sin and death and that you not only feed us in the wilderness, but that the purpose of the cross is to make all things new—that there is a promised land to come. Strengthen us with your grace that we might give our allegiance to you and commit ourselves to the establishment of your kingdom on earth as in heaven. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.