

Sermon: *New and Old*
Scripture: Revelation 21.1-9
Christ's Community Church
5/18/2025

“Then I saw...”

The “Then I saw...” At the beginning of our Scripture this morning...

Directions backwards to what has just happened in this dramatic book of Revelation...

Revelation is a dangerous book...

Dangerous because it's a particular form of a literature...

Called “apocalyptic” -- characterized by complex symbols and dramatic imagery...

Portraying great and climactic battles between good and evil...

In Revelation, between the forces of Satan...

And the church....

And ultimately the heavenly armies...

And the triumphant day of Christ's return...

And rule....

It is dangerous to try to read and understand Revelation without spending a lot of time finding and unpacking the symbolism and metaphor...

Much of which is drawn from what we call the Old Testament...

Especially the prophets and apocalyptic literature...

Like Daniel and Ezekiel and Isaiah...

* * *

But it's also a letter, from a person who identifies himself as John...

Traditionally believed to be the apostle John, disciple of Jesus and author of the gospel of John...

Some scholars question that because of differences in the language used, and also because of their interpretation of imagery as wrecked referring to historical events that would have postdated the life of the apostle...

Neither the Gospel according to John, nor this book of Revelation, refer explicitly to the other, or identify the author of one as the same as the other...

And there were innumerable followers of Jesus name John...

So as is the case of a lot of our sacred texts in the Bible...

We cannot be sure who authored them...

But we can know that Revelation – like the other books of our scriptural canon...

Was embraced by the early church...

As an authentic witness to the word of God...

And I would tend to lean on that same tradition...

That identifies the author as the apostle John, the beloved disciple of Jesus and author of the gospel according to John...

If only because that Spirit-filled community of the early church that preserved this word of Revelation...

And declared it sacred and authentic...

And included in our canon...

That Spirit-filled community of 2000 years ago had their own unique and authoritative witness to the times...

And so, the meaning that they attached to it...

Bears something unique and authoritative that I must respect to no small degree...

Lest I think I am somehow better qualified than those who lived in the times that produced our scriptures....

To understand them...

We may bring something new and different and even better to their witness...

But we can never pretend to cut ourselves free of their witness...

And their authentication...

And their understanding of these texts...

Because without them

We would not have this book before us today ...

It's presence in our church is a result of its embrace by that early church

That embodies a unique and different experience from us

Even as we live the unique and different experience from them

Our experience of being removed 2000 years from the time of our Lord's birth, life, death and resurrection

Does bring something unique and authoritative to the understanding of the text...

But their experience of living in and around those times...

In the times of persecution that followed...

That too has an authority that we can never do without...

[A little introduction there, to the intended theme of today's message of, "new and old"...]

That all of this stuff of the church...

And of our faith....

Must respect both the new and the old...

New and old must be reconciled to one another...

The old because we are always beholden to what has come before...

We did not live through “the beginning...”

Science tells us that no human being lived through that beginning...

But some lived a lot closer to it than we did....

And a lot closer to the power of it....

* * *

Nor did we live through the flood of Noah’s time...

But someone did...

And accounts of that story are found in literature long predating the Bible...

Myths of great floods are found everywhere...

And geological evidence testifies to the reality of such events in our distant past...

In the one found in our sacred text...

Of Noah...

Has stood the test of time...

For its meaning...

That is still embraced as authoritative...

By Jews and Christians and, I believe, Muslims as well...

And even by people like me who think that science adds to that meaning, even when it raises questions about the details...

* * *

And so it goes...

.....nor did we live through the Exodus, or the journey in the wilderness or that revelatory encounter on Mount Sinai...

But our embrace and respect for the accounts that are given to us in the Bible...

Continue to inform us and allow us to see those all moments in our world and in our lives and experience of liberation and revelation and encounter with the God who created us....

* * *

We, like Job, need to hear that voice of God that spoke to Job in his moments of tribulation...

Saying, “who are you to ask me questions?”...

“Where were you in the beginning.... When I formed the heavens and the earth?”

So we might hear that voice speaking to us today, through witnesses from the times of our Lord...

“Where were we, when our Lord was crucified...”

“Where were we when he appeared to Thomas with his wounds...?”

And, “where were we when thousands of early followers died as martyrs in the persecution by Rome...”

That, we know happened...

And their suffering, attests to the reality of the revelation that they preserved for us...

And this John – author of the book of Revelation – places himself right there in the midst of that suffering...

Because Revelation is also a personal letter from one who identifies himself as John of Patmos...

An early believer who finds himself exiled on this island in the middle of the Aegean Sea some 40 miles off the coast of modern-day Turkey and Greece...

Where the suffers not only is on exile, but the memory of the martyrs of the early church...

Probably friends and neighbors of his...

And friends and neighbors of the churches he writes his letter to...

A letter that attests to a vision of Christ...

Speaking to him of the end times...

Speaking from the text and times of the distant past...

But also of his own contemporaneous encounter with the living and resurrected Christ...

In his message of hope...

Of the coming of the new creation...

A new heaven and earth...

A message of profound hope...

In the midst of suffering...

We should listen to him...

And seek to understand him...

And respect his experience...

Before thinking too much of our own...

* * *

So

“And then I saw ...”

What has just happened in the book of Revelation...

In chapter 20 ...

Is the great, apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil...

Has come to an end...

The battle that is, has come to an end ...

It kinda comes to two ends

Which introduces a whole mystery that I’m not capable of dealing with today...

For we would never get to our text for today...

But it comes first to an end when Satan is bound and chained and thrown into the abyss...

In Christ returns to the world ...

Another mystery – hasn’t he been with us all the time?

In Spirit, yes ...

But the second coming is something altogether different ...

And John has an image of it where Christ returns in a way that mediates two things...

The resurrection of the dead...

Referred to in Revelation 20 as the “first resurrection...”

And somehow limited – another heavy topic, worthy of much thought and study and reflection...

That we won't have time for today....

But that first resurrection is somehow limited to those worthy...

Those who have believed...

And those – and here's the real challenging part...

Somehow limited to those who have demonstrated their belief and faith by their works...

Friends I don't profess to understand the sometimes contradictory messages in our sacred texts and our church traditions...

Regarding the role of grace, faith, belief, repentance and works in the gift of salvation...

I only know what I believe...

And I believe this...

That our salvation is a gift of grace...

Given by God and sealed by the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ...

And the only work that is necessary to enjoy that gift...

Is to believe in it...

And I can live my entire life and sin...

And on some level I do...

As late as yesterday I am pretty sure I lived in sin for some part of the day...

And I'm pretty sure you did as well...

And so our confession together today is necessary for us all...

And we will probably go out of here and find ourselves sinning again...

And in need of confession and repentance again...

And some of us may even be insincere in our confession and repentance...

And we will suffer for that...

We will suffer, because on some level we know that we are separating ourselves...

Not only from our God...

But from ourselves...

Because who we are...

Is inseparable from him...

And from the destiny...

That he has chosen for us...

Which is to live in this wonderful perfection of his kingdom...

That kingdom that John has seen and shared with us in our Scripture today...

Of a new heaven and a new earth...

When God's presence with us...

Is not just something we believe...

And experience from a distance...

By the extension of his Holy Spirit...

But a presence and reality that is actual...

God dwells -- Revelation 21 tells us...

God dwells here with us...

And not only embraces us with his love and forgiveness...

But creates a new order of things for us...

Where there is no cause for tears or mourning or crying...

There is no more pain and suffering...

And there are no liars for murderers or in reality...

* * *

That's justice...

There is justice in this new heaven and new earth...

It's a just world we will live in...

With God is our neighbor...

And our neighbor and us at peace...

* * *

Alright I'm already slipping ahead there into Revelation 21...

And I might not have much more to say about it by the time I get there....

Because it's so beautiful...

You have to be drawn to it...

But I can't get there without addressing this "problem"...

That may burden some of us...

The sense that our own sins...

And our own doubts and times of disbelief...

Might keep us from this reality...

So I want to tell you what I believe about that...

I'd like to promise you...

But...thank God you don't have to depend on me for that promise....

Because God has already promised and sealed the promise of your salvation...

And your life in eternity...

In this new heaven and new earth that John has seen and shared with us...

* * *

This promise is for you and me...

And all we need to do...

The only work that is necessary from us...

Is too accept the promise...

That is, to believe...

Or even hope to believe...

* * *

And I think I know...

That all of us are on the right side of that belief equation...

That we lean on, and towards, God's love and promises...

Every time we come here and share in his worship together...

And every time we share in this meal...

Every time we confess and repent -- every time we say we do...

We lean on and toward that love of God that saves us...

* * *

And I have no doubt that when we ourselves experience the living Christ in reality in that passage from life to death...

That whatever doubts we have had...

Will be overwhelmed by the presence of that love standing before us...

* * *

Whatever turning we yet need to do...

We will do without hesitation...

* * *

Whatever we don't understand about where that love directs us to go...

We will have no difficulty discerning...

* * *

And you and I -- and those we love -- will be saved by that same love...

In the end...

You and I and those we love will not be able to resist that...

It's our destiny...

We will live this reality that John had seen and shared with us in Revelation...

* * *

Now there is a twist in Revelation 20 that may even encourage you more...

I spoke about the illusion in Revelation 20 to the “first resurrection...”

In the weirdness of this time after the first resurrection where Christ reigns – for thousand years were told – with the righteous of the first resurrection...

You and I, I believe, will be part of that first resurrection...

We will, by then, have experienced that reality of Christ standing before us..

And our leanings will take us immediately to him...

And we will believe fully...

If we do not already...

And we will obey his command to turn to that love...

And accept it...

I mean who wouldn't?

* * *

But the weird twist is at the end of Revelation 20...

When Satan, who has been chained and thrown into the abyss...

Is set free...

And there is a second resurrection...

Presumably of the unworthy...

Who join Satan in yet another apocalyptic battle...

And they are defeated...

And thrown into the lake of fire...

And he erased from the book of life...

* * *

Boy I wish we could spend some time talking about that...

But let me just say this...

If there's a second resurrection...

I believe it is yet another chance...

Even for those who have died unworthy and don't share in that first resurrection...

Who have leaned the wrong way...

And refused the gift...

To accept love and eternity...

Over hate and death

What Revelation 20 refers to as the "second death..."

May just be another chance...

Is that the last chance?

Truly only God knows...

But what we know, is as long as we live in this life...

And according to Revelation...

Even at the end of this life and after...

God will present himself to us in Jesus Christ...

And present himself only as a God of love, offering us yet another life...

And all we need to do is say ...

“Yes, I believe in love...”

“Yes, I believe in life...”

“Yes I believe in God, the giver love and life...”

And, “Yes, I believe in myself, as part of God’s good creation...”

Because in believing in God and his promises...

In doing so we are really expressing belief in ourselves...

Because that’s who we are...

God’s creation in love....

Destined from the beginning...

For God’s kingdom of love...

And life in eternity...

* * *

I should stop there, because...

That’s a good word I think...

And I have said a bit about Revelation 21...

As I couldn’t help but get there...

Because it’s so beautiful...

And it really does speak for itself...

But I want to read the first four verses...

Let us immerse ourselves that vision that John saw and has shared with us...

And highlight one other theme that is important to me...

I want to share with you...

Because we live in a world that sometimes struggle to find meaning and purpose in this life in this history...

In the meaning of this for the present...

Even part of the Christian world seems to spend so much time denigrating us – humanity – the pinnacle of God's creation...

And suggests that the world ends in in destruction of the world we know...

And even denial of our very selves...

And rescues some and takes him away to some heavenly kingdom...

And even those that embrace a different and -- an end that affirms this world and preserves ourselves....

Often doubt and denigrate the importance and purpose of how we live our lives today...

And what we do today...

And of her own capacity for obedience and love and justice...

If what we do does not make a difference in the world to come...

Then what's the point of this life in the present time?

So I want to read the first four verses again and highlight a couple of things that I think speaks to a different reality...

One more affirming of us...

Of our sometimes success in practicing love in doing justice

And of our sometimes suffering for it....

21 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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.
He will dwell^[b] with them;
they will be his peoples,^[c]
and God himself will be with them and be their God;^[d]
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for^[e] the first things have passed away.”

Two things:

1. Heaven comes to earth
2. And the things that pass are the things that brought suffering to the world

So we can believe that the justice we do does not pass with these things that are no more...

But becomes part of the new order of things – that is just

The love we share does not pass with the old things...

But becomes part of the new – because love prevails...

And the suffering we bear is not forgotten...

But lifted up and celebrated and given a new meaning in the victory of the new Kingdom

Because our suffering, like Christ's suffering, is what has brought this new heaven to earth...

And this is why we listen John...

Who suffers in exile...

A survivor in exile of a church that suffered profoundly for the Gospel...

This old vision of the new creation...

Speaks with his authority to all of us who lean on God...

And long for justice...

And love this world as he did...

And suffers in witness to others...

That they might live in this same Hope...

Amen.

But to separate us, I can't get there still leaving this baggage of this message in Revelation 20...

That our works matter ...

That their history matters

That confession and repentance matters...

So let me just say that I believe it does matter...

That if I can get to it...

My message from our text for today – Revelation 21...

Is that what passes away in the end testified to in Revelation 21...

What is no longer with us in this new heaven and new earth...

Is the burden and judgment of that sin that still weighs amounts and impairs us...

But that is already past...

Christ took care of that on the cross...

And we are given the freedom from it...

And we exercise that freedom every time we confess and repent...

In the good news there, friends is if we feel burdened by our own sin today...

We can confess today...

And turn however much away from that sinful disposition and toward the life of goodness that God wills for us...

And every time we do that we succeed...

And if we fail again tomorrow...

We can succeed again on Tuesday...

When I'd wait for Tuesday we can succeed tomorrow...

And I believe we can succeed right up to that final moment...

When we see the living Christ for who and what he really is...

Love for us for eternity...

And I know that anyone who is here today...

As at least so inclined to want that...

That if you haven't found it yet...

You will someday...

Even if not final day...

The past from this life to the next..

In the living Christ meets you in that reality...

And because you've heard the good news...

And because you only want that...

You will be accepted by Him, then...

As you already are today...

Nothing can separate you were me from that love...

And I'm not sure there's anything we can separate you or me from accepting that love...

In living in that love...

In the resurrection...

Ad the myths of a