

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 The 5th Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022
 John 13: 31-35, Revelation
 What New Thing? By Rev. Sue Trigger

GOSPEL LESSON John 13:31-35 (*CEB*)

When Judas was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Human One has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Human One in himself and will glorify him immediately. Little children, I’m with you for a little while longer. You will look for me — but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now — ‘Where I’m going, you can’t come.’ “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE LESSON Revelation 21:1-6 (*CEB*)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.

The book of Revelation is one of the most ignored books of the Bible among Presbyterians and other Protestant communities. It is the one book of the Bible John Calvin never wrote a commentary about. The reason we don’t spend a lot of time with this apocalyptic book fits closely with our understanding of the Bible. For one thing, Jesus said, no one knows the day and the hour when he will return. Enough said, no sense speculating on something no one knows. Some will read the book of Revelation and assume that the book is a revelation of the details of end times. Some of you will remember “The Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. People were convinced that the images the books and movies portrayed were about to actually happen. That was

the 1990's – and we're still here. As Presbyterians, we don't believe that many of those ideas are consistent with what Jesus said or with other apocalyptic writings in the Bible. From our perspective, what we believe is that the Bible points us to focus on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Yes, we believe there will be a second coming, a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and new earth, but we have no idea when that is going to happen, and if Jesus didn't give us the details, it's not ours to worry about. And so we focus on what we do know. We do know that Jesus promised that he would come again, and so we choose to live with expectancy. Like a bride and groom in the moments before they marry. We believe that we should be ready for that day as if it is coming today. How do we do that? We do the things Jesus told us to.

I wanted to talk about this text from the book of Revelation, because it may be that there is something important we miss out on when we spend so little time with Revelation.

The time of John was a time of crisis for Israel. It is believed by some that Revelation was written just before the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. Around the time of 70 A.D. But most scholars think it was later, around 95 or 96 A.D. It was a turbulent time. The Roman empire was still occupying the territory and the Christian movement was spreading. The division between Jews and Christians was widening. The Jews had gone to war against Rome and lost 4 of their fortresses and the temple in Jerusalem. Thousands of Jews died in the wars and others were taken as slaves to work in mines and on ships. Others were taken to fight to the death against wild animals in theaters. Jerusalem had lost its place as an economic power and the people became even more impoverished. The faithful found themselves confused as they lost their spiritual center; the Jews lost the temple and the Christians lost Jesus.¹ Divisions caused distrust and chaos that led to violence.

I'm wondering if you're feeling like there are some similarities to our time, or perhaps to your life? There's no doubt that this is a very divided time, not just in our nation, but in the world. Democracies are struggling to hold on against the pressure of autocratic leaders. The war in Ukraine has caused terrible destruction against innocent civilians. Slavery continues, economies are struggling, human rights are being debated, people are

dying from gun violence every day, teachers and medical professionals are being criticized and threatened, and of course the pandemic continues to adapt and resurface in a new variant. It is a lot to deal with. In the midst of the unrest, people of faith are finding themselves confused and frustrated. Some are walking away from faith entirely, some communities are dividing along theological lines.

In our Scripture reading today it says, “I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.”

“Revelation promises believers that good things await. For those first century believers, John’s vision was an affirmation that Jesus will return, bringing with him victory against persecution and pain on earth. When is this new thing going to happen? I’m Presbyterian, I can’t tell you that. What I find more important is that this last book of the Bible threads together the biblical narrative affirming the heart of a God whose goal has always been to redeem broken relationships. God is committed to redeeming all of creation. It is in this transformed place that God will dwell with all creatures.

So what is the problem? If God is dwelling with us, why isn’t the world transformed? Perhaps the answer lies in the vision of a New Jerusalem as a city without a sea. What is the one thing that separates the continents from each other? Water. The oceans, seas, rivers. For John, the sea represents a separation. It also represents the chaos that separates us from God and one another. In Revelation the sea is the abyss from which the dragon arises to torment the earth. A city without a sea is a place without separation. In the sea-less city John describes there is a unifying vision, one that invites us to consider the metaphorical seas that separate us from God and one another.

Seas like war, the pandemic, racial inequality, gender inequality, economics, culture, and so much more are things that continue to torment us. ⁱⁱ They are part of the chasm that prevents us from living in covenant with each other. The question then is not where is

God? Or even when is Jesus going to return? As Presbyterians, we would rather ask, what do we need to do to improve things? God is with us now. God is alpha and omega, God has been at work since the beginning of time. The more important question is how are we living out our part of the covenant? How are we living out God's hope and love for all humanity and creation. God has always desired redemption, not destruction. How do we practice redemption and not destruction in our daily lives?

This vision of John is an invitation for us to model a vision of covenant life together where we carry out the work of the Gospel until he comes again. It is an invitation to be a faithful people, living and working within the complexities of human reality. Working to remove all that separates and isolates us from God and one another. And doesn't that sound like the way a Presbyterian would act? I hope so. Our focus can't be caught up in trying to figure out a mystery that only God knows. Our focus must be on bridging the chasms that separate us from God and one another. May we begin that work in our relationships with those who are closest to us, family members we are separated from, those in our church family, the people in our community who are different that we are for whatever reason. Wherever there is separation, may we bring the love that redeems.

ⁱ Encyclopedia.com, **Destruction of the Second Temple until the Arab Conquest (70–640 c.e.)**

ⁱⁱ Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Teaching, Year C, Volume 2; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. Pp. 257-261.