

No More First Things

Revelation 21: 1-6

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November 1, 2009

All Saints Sunday

As people centered around the Word of God accessed through the Bible, we tend to focus on two things: what these scriptures witnessed in an ancient time, and what it helps us witness in our own time. The Syrophoenician woman's bold faith was healing, the power of which I also see in Uncle Al's recent weight-loss. Joking aside, the Bible can be a powerful tool for listening to the echoes from the past, which turn out to have faint harmonies in our everyday life.

What we do less of in mainline Protestantism, though, is pay attention to what these scriptures witness about a future time, and what that glimpse helps us witness in our own time. That's why we should thank goodness for books like Revelation, the account by John of Patmos of a vision he had. Not a vision of earth that should be understood literally, but a vision of heaven that should be understood as imagery for the cosmic battle that has already been won by God's goodness, awaiting manifestation on earth.

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

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. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' 6Then 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 water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

On All Saints Day we proclaim the gospel truth that we're surrounded by a community of faithfulness and love far beyond what we can see, and we proclaim this truth in the face of a life that doesn't always make us feel accompanied or embraced.

I am mindful on this day of a particular feeling I had of being unaccompanied and unembraced, a moment so terrifying that either I froze or time did. I was sitting next to the operating table where my beloved Amanda was lying. We were expecting our first child, whom we had already named Matthew, but it turned out Matthew had inherited the giant Lower family cranium, and so was making for a rather dramatic arrival. After 24 hours of labor, I was exhausted (I don't know about Amanda), and it was time to give Matthew an alternative route to the world by caesarian section.

The ensuing moments, holding Amanda's nervous hand as she was put to sleep, and waiting for the birth of something new in our lives, became terrifying. The awe-struck bedazzlement was soon overcome with a glaring sense of inadequacy, fear of the unknown, fear of being in this alone. I'm still just a motherless child, I thought, a supposed-to-be-grownup boy incapable of remembering birthdays, much less being a father, or a husband to a mother. Life was about to change forever, and there were a million things I wished I had done or

done differently up to that point, but it was too late now. We were in a barrel at the crest of one of life's great falls, staring down at the foggy mist below, discovering our own helplessness against the rushing water of life and gravity.

At this terrifying moment, I experienced in my own little life the kind of faith crisis that beset the community of Patmos, for whom John wrote down his Revelation. This was a community that was tired and scared, tired of waiting for the resurrected Jesus to return, tired of their plight as poor and marginalized, tired of all the internal bickering and division, and scared of all the persecution, scared of being alone in their beliefs about God, and scared that maybe the promise of a blessed future was gone. There were powers in the world, powers of darkness around them and within them, which were drowning out their faith, because they didn't like the looks of where it was all going.

We know about powers of darkness, too, don't we, the external powers of bills and mortgages and debt, of a world that wants you to be something out of a magazine instead of your authentic self, of a world that measures you with tests and money, of a world whose pressures most people don't measure up to, and many just get swallowed up by their own sense of poverty. There are powers in the world that we feel powerless against. And running underneath all that is a sense that none of us is forever, a truth we can only bear if we feel connected, and sometimes that feeling wanes, and we don't like the looks of where it is all going.

It is in this place that John witnesses to his Revelation, he testifies to seeing a new heaven and a new earth. And the content of this newness is particular and captivating – a heaven and earth in which death and mourning and crying and pain and loneliness are no more – where these “first things” have passed away. John's vision proclaims a coming reality in which the things that DISCOLOR our sense of where things are going PASS AWAY, and all things are made new. John invites us to imagine that the destination, where we're headed, is a place where all our senses of loss that have a vice-grip on us and our sense of hope will be released. Injustice, poverty, oppression, lost dreams, lost loved ones, regret, loneliness, despair – these first things will have passed away, and all things will be made new.

The new-making, according to John's Revelation, is done by God's home-making. See, the voice of heaven says to John, the home of God is among mortals, God will dwell with you all, and you will be God's people. God, the kind of God who walked the earth in Jesus Christ, makes a home with us, what an extraordinary claim about what is to come. God will be with us, wiping our tears away, undoing death and all endings, and writing a new story, as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Today we will receive communion, and on this All Saints Day we should be as mindful as ever that this is both a looking back to the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples, but also a looking ahead, to the Last Supper that God has with all souls in the new heaven and earth, the “heavenly feast” we sometimes call it. This is a foretaste, we might say, of the great banquet that is to come, marvelous not only for what is served, but also for those who are present – namely the souls of God's beloved children, from every time and place, and God the new homemaker. We acknowledge that this supper is one whose place cards are not limited by the walls of this or any church, or by any walls of class or race or culture, nor limited by those we can see. When you take communion today, we will come to the table that includes names of those who have meant a great deal to our own faith, our own sense of hope, our own commitment to the good life. When you come forward, can you picture these people important to you seated at the table, can you picture the comforting faces of strangers, from every time and place, widening circles of faithful and loving people surrounding this table, all proclaiming the eternal truth of God's homemaking and new-making among us.

It's hard to trust in anything we cannot see, especially the communion truth that we are accompanied and embraced in every space of life, even the scariest, the most lonely. I remember feeling unaccompanied and unembraced in that terrifying experience in the operating room with Amanda, and then something new was born. Literally my son Matthew was born, a little dude who looked strangely familiar, but also a new and liberating truth was born for me that changed my life. The nurses who whisked away that new life, as they were cleaning him up, noticed something strange. From across the room, I heard a voice, "Where did this beautiful baby boy get this red hair?" I thought she was pulling my leg, some kind of a cruel joke told to fathers wondering about their own paternity. And then I saw him. My baby boy with unmistakably red hair. Amanda was just coming to, and grew startled by the red hair claim too. "Like Ronald McDonald?" "No, Honey, It's Momma's." It's beautiful. It's hair I haven't seen in 20 years. That was a moment of birth and revelation in my life, it was like meeting something entirely new, and in so doing finding something and someone I'd been looking for most of my life, and realizing that what I thought I had lost and lived without, had actually never left.

It is revelation, that God dwells with us, that God never leaves our side, that God unites us with each other and all children in every time and place, that no matter where we are we are never alone and never unloved, this is what we proclaim today, in word and sacrament. Thanks be to God.