

11-6-21
All Saints'
Revelation 21:1-6a
Communion

All Things New!

I've never been one of those readers that reads the last chapter of a book first, then, knowing how it ends, go back and piece it all together as I read. I much prefer trying to figure it out as I go. Sometimes things work out just about how I thought they would. Then sometimes I think I've got it all worked out in my mind, and the writer will throw me a curve, introduce a character or a plot turn that I didn't see coming. Sometimes I get to the end and am totally surprised by how it comes out. Sometimes I'm so glad to get it over with, I really don't care—just make it stop!

If we accept that the Bible is a primary resource for our life of faith, then we will probably agree that it's a book we ought to read, a book we ought to invest some time in. The Bible is not a continual narrative, not a book we can read like the latest Grisham novel or follow like our favorite series on TV. A lot of people who are not invested in a community like ours might not know that. So I wonder what some of those people might think if they picked up the Bible and read this last book first? This book we know as the Revelation of John. It is a book that even many of us who are invested in our faith don't spend much time in. Our text for this morning comes from very near the end of this book which comes at the very end of our Scripture. The very nature of the book is unsettling. Its author, John, is in exile, persecuted as many in his day were, for his faith. And while in exile, he has a series of visions about the future. Not the kind of future most of us are wrapped up in these days: we won't find an end date for Covid or picks for next week's football games or way too early predictions of who will be in the basketball tournament in March.

The future John sees is the future, the end of human history, the way God will bring all of this to a close and usher in the new age that will last forever.

Imagine picking up the Bible for the first time. Letting it fall open in the middle and reading a few Psalms and finding things that sound a lot like how we live today. Then leafing back to places like Leviticus and Numbers and wondering what in the world all that has to do with much that matters. Quickly leaving that part for another day, maybe we flip to the end and find these strange words and images about something that is coming, something we haven't seen yet. Knowing how it all comes out gives us assurance as we go back and try to piece the whole story together, even Leviticus and Numbers!

For most of us, life doesn't usually offer us that kind of certainty. I look across the room today and see people whose whole lives have been invested in this community. Generational ties to this place and for some, to this congregation. I think of people like Emily and Eileen who have seen more than a hundred years unfold here and who have been nurtured and guided by this Church through those years. Others of you who were children and young people here, went away to school and came back to pursue careers and rear families in this place that has always been home.

Others of us envy that kind of stability and permanence. When Deanna and I married in 1974, we moved about a hundred miles from where our families lived to Elizabethtown, Kentucky where we knew no one except the principals who offered us jobs as teachers. In the innocence that comes with that stage of life, I think we really thought we'd teach in those two schools for thirty years and probably be buried out behind the concession stand where we took our turn working. There was no way we could have foreseen the twists and turns our lives would take, the places they would take us, and the people we would meet and share life with along the way. Other than the fact that we're still married to each other, there is very little about our life today that is anything at all like the life we set out on there. Careers, locations,

people—none of the things we know today were even on the radar back then.

Some of your lives are similar to ours. Others of you probably set some goals and stuck with them, and your life has unfolded pretty much as you planned it out.

For many who begin careers and journeys today, that kind of lifelong planning is simply not possible. Some of the jobs our kids envision as their call might not even be here when they're ready to embark on them. Some of the things those kids come home and tell us they want to do didn't even exist a few years ago. Traditional paths don't always lead us where we want to go anymore, and we have to be brave and bold enough to set out down paths that no one has traveled before.

Even with all the uncertainty that has become part of life for most of us, there is still a desire in most of us to know how it will all come out, where we will go and how we'll get there.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, the stakes get even higher. And the paths get even more confusing. Many of us started life in Sunday School. We learned the stories and believed what they told us about them. We learned to believe in Jesus and to trust that what we believed about him was the truth. Then life set in. Relationships turned out to be different than we thought they would be. Friendships we counted on disappointed us. Life turned out to be a lot harder than we were led to believe it would be in Sunday School. Maybe we even wandered a while. Many do. But something always drew us back. Sometimes it was joyful things—Christmas, Easter, weddings, baptisms—sometimes it was sadder times—parents and grandparents die; sometimes children and friends do, too, and we find ourselves back here again, hearing those same promises and assurances, and we decide to try again---whatever brought us back, we were reminded of who we set out to be and decided to give it a try again. That desire to know how it all ends was always part of that. Especially when we gather for those big events, we need to know and want to know that there is something to all this,

something more than the daily grind and the rush to succeed that draw us away from what we believe so easily.

John faced an altogether different set of circumstances than we do, but I'm sure as he sat there in that place where he lived in a place and in a way he hadn't planned for, he wondered the same things we do: When will this end? How will it end? What will happen to me?

God sent John a series of visions that Christians and non-believers alike have been arguing about ever since. Luther refused to translate this book into German when he translated the rest of the Bible, deciding it was just too confusing for most people to understand. Since then, some people don't seem to want to talk about anything but Revelation, and others try to avoid it as much as we can. I went out to change the sign outside our church this week and wondered what people would think was going on among the Presbyterians this week when they saw that we were preaching Revelation this morning. Maybe they'll join us online and see.

I was taught, and I believe, what Scripture says about itself: that all of it is valuable to us in some way, that we need to struggle with some parts of it and rejoice with other parts of it as we journey through life with God as our guide. I tend to pay more attention to the things Jesus said, and I try to understand the rest of Scripture in light of those things. So since Jesus said that even he didn't know all the details about how God would bring an end to human history, I don't spend a lot of time looking for cryptic, hidden messages in this book or any other.

Fortunately, these words we read today don't require that of us. It does, however, challenge us to come to terms with an important thing about how we will trust God to lead us into a future we have not seen.

There is a lot of talk in today's text about newness. And a lot of us have a running battle with that concept. If you wander through our house, you'll pretty quickly discover that we're not much into new things. We live in an old house that isn't laid out in the open concept that everyone seems to prefer these days. We

still have walls and rooms that are probably too small to suit some, but they're what we like. Those rooms are full of old things. I'm not sure what an antique is anymore, except to admit that I'm fast becoming one, but most of our furniture has been around for a while. Some of the cabinets are full of things that are lot older than we are. I have a white ironstone bowl that was one of two that held gravy at both ends of the breakfast table at my grandparents' house. I'm told that my grandmother's mother gave those bowls to her. I wound up with one of them, by hook or crook, and one of our boys will, hopefully take it when I'm gone. I like old things. One of my goals in retirement is to re-read some of the old books I read in school all those years ago—reread Shakespeare and the English Lake Poets. I read them all back when I was supposed to, and I taught some of them when I was supposed to, but I haven't spent much time with them since then. I want to go back and see if they're still as good as we were taught they were. I suspect I'll still read whatever Grisham cranks out and I know I'll continue to read Ron Rash and Silas House and my other favorite authors of today, and I suspect I'll find some new favorites I don't know yet. But I don't want to lose my grip on the old things.

That's my struggle with all this talk about new heaven and new earth. I suspect it might be a struggle for some of you, too. John says he saw a new heaven and a new earth, that the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Then he hears Jesus say from the throne, "I am making all things new." And then, just to make sure we didn't miss the point, he said, "Write this down. Remember it. It is the truth."

Even after the uncertainty of the past couple of years, most of us have grown pretty attached to this first heaven and first earth we know. Even with the uncertainty that my decision to retire thrown into the mix, most of us want to see the Church continue to thrive and grow. This first heaven and first earth are pretty meaningful to us. It's hard for us to hear that there is something else, something we don't know.

We gather today to remember some who have passed from this life to the life to which we all intend to go. Sue and John and Phyllis and Ann and Libby were all here among us not so very long ago. Their paths were all different, but they all ran through here. Many of you remember others, family and friends, today, too. As illness began to take its toll on Phyllis, she used to tell us in Thursday morning Bible study that she loved us all and she enjoyed our conversations about Scripture, even when she disagreed with Ralph, but she was ready to see what was next. Now she knows. I'm sure there were some things about that new heaven and new earth that turned out to be not exactly as Sue thought they were going to be. But I'm also sure that didn't matter. Even for those of us who value what we know and understand, God's new thing will be exactly what we need, and we will be new creation when we experience it.

I can't tell you much with certainty about what that new heaven and new earth will be. But I can tell you that the newness that God will call forth of us won't even remember the joy and the sorrow we leave behind here to be part of it. We catch a glimpse of those new things at this Table today. We are joined here by those we see around us, by these five of our number we remember today and by the great host of all who have gathered at God's Table in millions of other places. The old, the current, and the new all gather to rejoice in the love and mercy of the One who makes all things, including us, new. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God, of grace, our Redeemer and Guide, help us to ground our lives in your love, love for you and love you call us to extend to one another. Open our hearts to one another and show us ways to share all the gifts of life with everyone around us, especially those who suffer. Keep us attuned to the ways you are present with us in the world, especially in your calls to share what we have. We give thanks for many gifts this day, some so common that we lose sight of their value, and some so extraordinary that

we're not even sure about how to think about them. We thank you for lungs that fill with air with every breath, reminding us that we are alive—and we think of some we love for whom even breathing is a struggle. We thank you for the heart that beats within our chest, not just circulating life-giving blood, but showing us how to love and live in relationship with you and with each other. We thank you for hands and for feet that allow us to work and to serve. For minds that ponder the great mystery of your love for us. We pray for the needs of people around us, and we commit ourselves to serve as you have served us. We pray especially for those who are overwhelmed by many responsibilities, especially the responsibilities of leadership. For those who are exhausted from constant navigation of uncertainty and change in this age. We pray for all who are ill and for those who care for them. For all of us who need courage and strength to embrace change and move forward instead of clinging to a past that is no longer here or helpful. We are thankful today for the life and witness of all we remember, and we strive to live so that some will remember us with thanks one day. Continue to call us to journey together toward common purpose and mission, O God, as we strive to be the Body of Christ in this world you made and sustain even amid constant change. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus who loves us and empowers us to love you and one another. Amen.