

SO, WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?
(First in a three-part Advent series)

So ... what are we waiting for? Not only during the season of Advent, the season of intentional waiting and hoping and longing, but throughout the year, throughout the years, what are we waiting for?

If I read the human soul correctly, a majority of people throughout the ages has sensed that something is coming. Or, at least, hoping that something is coming – something better than the present. Even those who have not yet had the privilege of reading the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, sense that something is coming. They are waiting for something more.

What? Waiting for what?

The text before us this morning is the closing chapters of the last book of the Bible; the last chapters of The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, Revelation 21-22. We have been emphasizing that Apocalyptic literature, the kind we are dealing with in the last book of the Bible, has two practical, pastoral purposes. One – the one we have been working with the past few Sundays – is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. The other is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

Revelation 21-22, where Jesus Christ, through His angel, pulls back the curtain on the unseen realities of the future. In the nature of things, future realities are necessarily unseen. In the closing chapters of the Bible, Jesus Christ gives us His apocalypse of the future.

And even though He reveals what He reveals in a kaleidoscope of images and symbols, we discover that the old saying, by which many dismiss the Christian vision of the future, is simply not true. You know the saying: “Pie in the sky bye and bye.” The Christian hope for the future is dismissed as “Pie in the sky bye and bye.” When we read Revelation 21-22, we discover it is not “in the sky.” We discover it is a whole lot more than “pie.” And we discover that it is not even “bye and bye.”

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

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 without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”

(Revelation 21:1-22:7)

What an amazing text! I know I’ve been saying that about every text we have considered from the last book of the Bible, but it has to be said about this one! What an amazing text! It is so rich that we are going to read it and work our way through it on three Sundays of this Advent season.

Here is the plan for today. I want to first hold before us four phrases which I think can help us read the text correctly. I will then ask three questions this text triggers for us today. Four phrases and three questions. The questions will lead us directly to the Lord’s Table: “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”

Four phrases that help us read the future correctly. First phrase: “heaven and earth.” Revelation 21:1: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” “Heaven and earth.” Eugene Peterson puts it so well (as he usually does!):

“The biblical story began, quite logically, with a beginning. Now it draws to an end, not quite so logically, also with a beginning. The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed of Revelation. The product of these beginning and ending acts of creation are the same: ‘the heavens and earth’ in Genesis, and ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ in Revelation. The story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its last word.” [*Reversed Thunder*, 169-170]

“Heaven and earth.” First heaven and first earth. New heaven and new earth. In the Bible those two words regularly go together. Heaven and earth intertwined, interlocking, intersecting. There is no earth without a heaven, and there is no heaven without an earth. Both created – Earth created, but so too heaven.

Two dimensions of one larger reality. Intertwined, interlocking, intersecting. What happens in one affecting the other; what goes on in heaven affecting life on earth; and what goes on on earth affecting life in heaven. Thus the fall – the sin of Adam and Eve, Genesis 3. When humanity fell, the earth was affected, a fact of which we are all too painfully aware. When humanity sinned, the earth was affected, and is still being affected by human sin. But so too heaven -- when humanity sinned on earth, heaven was affected. And since that time a war has raged in heaven, and thus on earth. Revelation 12:7: “And there was war in heaven.” In heaven? Yes, heaven as a dimension of creation has been affected by what happened on earth.

Which is why the apostle Paul can say what he says about “the heavenlies” in his masterful letter to the Ephesians. He says that we who are in Jesus Christ on the earth have been blessed in Jesus “in the heavenly places.” He says that we who are in Jesus Christ on earth have somehow been seated with Jesus “in the heavenly places.” And he says that there are “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

The popular understanding of “heaven” is that it is a place totally divorced from reality on earth. The popular understanding is that “heaven” is a place of total bliss. One day it will be, but not now. For what takes place on earth affects heaven; and what takes place in heaven affects earth.

“Heaven and earth,” “earth and heaven.” Together; two parts of a larger whole. Both realms of reality created by God, neither inherently eternal. Both – like the human body - subject to the passing of time. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth has passed away.” (Revelation 21:1). “The old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

Thus, the second phrase... “passed away” and “coming down.” Revelation 21:1: “The first heaven and first earth had passed away.” Revelation 21:2: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” These two events are co-terminus, happening at the same time. The “passing away” happens because of the “coming down.”

The first heaven and the first earth would have “passed away” without the “coming down.” They are not eternal. In time, they would have passed away, especially given human sin. “Subjected to futility,” as Paul says in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, and “longing to be set free from futility,” he adds! To which we say a hearty “Amen!”

But what John sees in the Apocalypse of the future is the “passed away” happens because of the “coming down.” This is a very humbling revelation. Creation is not eternal. Creation – as wonderful as it is, as massive as it is – is not eternal. Only the Creator is eternal. Only God is immortal. Praise be to His name that in grace He bestows immortality on humans. But Only He is inherently immortal. Creation is not eternal. It exists at the good pleasure of the Creator for as long as He wills it to exist.

A new creation “coming down.” A new creation that is a new city, a holy city, “coming down... out of heaven... from God.” That is the key clause – “From God.” Just as God had created the first heaven and first earth, so He created a new heaven and a new earth, which, apparently, He wills to last into eternity.

“From God.” Meaning that the new creation does not evolve from the first creation. The new creation is created apart from the first creation, outside the first creation. God is creating something brand new, something that has not existed before. If you’ve read the whole Bible, you know that God is fond of doing that! A Baby born of a virgin. A carpenter raised from the grave. A new heaven and a new earth.

The new creation is a matter of descent not ascent. Descending from God, not ascending from us. “Passed away,” “coming down.” The old creation, the first, “passed away” because the new is “coming down from God.”

Then what are to do about the call to care for this creation? What are we to do with this clear call of the Gospel? Since the creation we know is to “pass away,” why should we bother to care for it? Well, for one thing, this first creation is a gift from God, for however long we have it, and it just makes sense to care for a gift. My body is “passing away.” Since it is “passing away” should I then not care for it? No – of course I should care for it! My body is a gift from God, and I must care for it. Besides, I want to live as well as I can for however long God wills me to live.

But we are to care for this creation for another more fundamental reason. We are commanded to do so. In the first chapter of the Bible, we are commanded to “rule over” the gift God has given us. The idea or

“rule over” is to care for it, so that it can be all God wants it to be. We embrace this call to “creation care” because we are under orders from the Creator to do so. The fact that he is bringing a new creation does not change the command about the first creation.

As the “Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care,” held in St. Ann, Jamaica this November, rightly stresses: “Love for God, our neighbors and the wider creation, as well as our passion for justice, compel us to ‘urgent and prophetic ecological responsibility’.” “This is My Father’s world,” sings the old hymn. And if I love My Father I will love His world. For however long My Father wills His world to exist. “Passed away,” “coming down.” The first “passed away” because the new is “coming down.”

Third phrase: continuity and discontinuity. There is continuity between the first creation and the new creation. This is why Jesus can use images and symbols from the first creation to describe the new creation. Gates, walls, streets, jewels, trees, rivers, kings bringing in their merchandise.

Yet, there is a discontinuity, a profound discontinuity – things are different, really different, like nothing we have seen or touched in this beautiful first creation. This is why Jesus can only use images and symbols from the first to describe the new. If He were to show us the reality behind the images and symbols we would not get it; we could not get it; there is finally nothing in this creation to compare with the new creation. A world without pain? I can’t imagine that! A world without death? Can that really be?

You see, the new creation is more than the renewal of the first. That would be wonderful enough – for God to fully renew this creation. But God is doing more – He is bringing into being something that never existed, except, of course, in His own mind and heart.

Now, you realize, do you not, that God has already presented us with this continuity-discontinuity in His greatest creative act in the first creation? I’m thinking here of the resurrection of Jesus, and of Jesus’ resurrection body. Continuity with the body He had for 33 years, but profound discontinuity. When Jesus rose from the dead He did not go back to the way things were before He died. On Easter morning, Jesus was alive bodily, but in a new body, like the body He had for 33 years, but also very unlike that body.

When the disciples looked at his face they recognized him. He ate food just as He had before. They touched his hands and side and realized he was not a ghost. But unlike before the resurrection, He could walk through doors and disappear in a moment and re-appear somewhere else. His resurrection body was like His earthly body, but it was also unlike it. Because God had brought into being what had never existed before.

And if we belong to Jesus Christ, we shall one day have such a body! Philippians 3:20-21: “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory.” But we are getting ahead of ourselves here.

Continuity and discontinuity. New creation, like the first creation, but more than the first. Far beyond anyone’s capacity to adequately describe. Far beyond anyone’s capacity to even imagine! “Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the heart of any human being, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Fourth phrase: already exists. The new heaven and the new earth already exists. We are not waiting for God to create the new creation. We are waiting for God to bring it “down.” The future is not about us going “up” somewhere, but of God bringing “down” what already exists.

The new creation, the new city, the Holy City already exists. It is the city we city-builders have wanted to build all these millennia. But qualitatively more than anything anyone has ever seen – as we will see next Sunday as we read and study the text again.

I am reading a new book by John Jefferson Davis of Gordon-Conwell Seminary. It is entitled *Meditation and Communion with God* -- so good! He puts in print what I have come to believe in the last few years, but have been nervous to say out loud. I was stunned when I actually read it in the words of a respected theologian!

The new Jerusalem, the new creation, the new city “already exists in the unseen dimensions but will be visibly revealed when Christ returns visibly.” The apostle John “sees the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God; he sees a city already fully built, not just bricks and mortar arriving on semitrailers for some future completion date. The transition is not from not-existing city to existing city, but from invisible, existing city to visible and existing city.” (73).

And that new city, the new creation, pulls at us from the future. It is “out there” in the future pulling at us. Does not the architectural wonder of our modern cities say this? Some say that the ever-rising sky-scrapers emerge from the human ego, wanting to make a statement about human grandeur, indeed, wanting, like the Tower of Babel, to reach into heaven itself. And in some cases, that is surely true. But do not the ever-rising sky-scrapers also emerge from the deeply rooted sense in the human soul that there is in fact a grand city “out there;” and the urge to build emerges from the grand city pulling at the human soul?

Already exists. Which means then that the two practical, pastoral purposes of Apocalyptic literature merge. To set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future *is* to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present! For in addition to Jesus Himself, the great unseen reality of the present is the new creation, the already-existing city of God!

And in a way I do not yet fully understand, the new creation is somehow accessible to us and us to it. As the writer of Hebrews says, already we have “tasted the powers of the age to come” (6:5). In relationship with Jesus Christ, through His Holy Spirit, we are already tasting, experiencing the life of the age to come. Already the life of the new creation is spilling from the future into the present, and, as John Davis says, is “made available to the church for its ministry and mission.”

Davis continues: “Alas, all too often the church today is being run on the natural energies of this age, rather than on the supernatural energy loosed by the resurrection of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit! If we have lost our heavenly imagination, we will be disinclined to access, by faith and prayer, the heavenly energy from above.” And then he asks, “Which energy does your church run on?” (75).

So, what are we waiting for? A new heaven and a new earth, a new creation, with a new humanity. More than anything anyone of us has ever seen or can imagine. Better than anyone’s best dream for the future.

And now three questions – among many! – that Jesus’ apocalypse of the future triggers. Question one: How do we know? How do we know such a future exists? How do we know the new creation is coming? One answer, only one: because He said so, because Jesus said so. It is all we have to go on. The word of Jesus Christ. The One Who came to us as one of us in the manger in Bethlehem; the One Who lived our lives in our bodies; the One Who is crucified on a Roman cross; the One Who three days later is raised from the dead; the One Who is alive as the Living Lord; promised to come again and bring with Him the new city. The whole Christian vision of the future rests on the integrity of Jesus. He is how we know that the city exists and is coming.

Question two: how then do we wait? And we have no choice but to wait! We cannot bring the city down; we cannot make the new creation happen. We have to wait. How? By seeking Jesus in this city. He is the embodiment of the new creation. He is what the new creation is all about. Seek Him. Day in and day out, in worship and in work, seek Jesus! Keep seeking Jesus. And keep seeking His Kingdom. Keep seeking to live by the values of His new creation. Reject the values of the old order, the old order that is passing away. Radically reject the ways of greed and violence and power and lust. Radically embrace the ways of justice and generosity and gentleness and hospitality, even to enemies. We wait by living in this city the way we will forever live in the new city.

Question three: do we want this to happen? Do we want Jesus to come and bring in the new heaven and the new earth? Not an easy question to answer, is it? Do you want this massive transition to take place? We are not sure, are we? Partly because we fear the unknown, even if it is so inviting. And partly because we are so attached to the old. I would like to see the new tower emerge on this site. I want to watch how God will bless our city through these new buildings. I want to preach at least one sermon in this refurbished sanctuary. The first creation, broken though it may be, is still desirable, and rightly so, for it is God’s gift to us. But He has a greater gift to give us! Do we want Him to bring it “down”?

I do. I want the suffering to end. I want the groaning to end. The groaning of creation, and the groaning of human beings. I want the suffering to end. No more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, says John. But mostly I want what we read in Revelation 21-22 to happen because I want to know Jesus. I know Him now, in part, but I cannot know Him fully until He comes. I cannot enjoy Him fully until He finally has His way ...and brings us into His new world.

“As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Why do we read that “until He comes” every time we gather at His Table? Because of what He said the night He instituted the sacrament: “For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15). All that He has for us is finally realized when He comes.

I want Him to come. He is what we are waiting for.