

Easter 7C
Revelation 21:9--22

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May 23, 2004

⁹Then 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.”

¹⁰And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God...

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

⁶And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

⁷“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; ⁹but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!”

¹⁰And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”

¹²“See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

¹⁴*Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

¹⁶***“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”***

¹⁷ *The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”
And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*

¹⁸*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; ¹⁹if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*

²⁰*The one who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**”*

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.*

How does it all end? That is one of the few truly universal questions. Everyone wants to know, What is on the other side of death? What awaits me as an individual and what awaits humanity and what awaits the universe as a whole? Like someone who picks up a long novel and begins by sneaking a peek at the last few pages, we want to know how things will end. Will there be a happy ending? Will the good guys be rewarded and the bad guys punished? How is God going to bring the story to a conclusion? All of these questions boil down to one question: does life have a purpose? If it does, how does that have an effect on how I live my life?

Near the end of the first century, John of Patmos wrote a letter to fellow Christians to both encourage and challenge them as they struggled to live out their Christian faith in the face of three challenging situations. Some faced the prospect of persecution, perhaps even death, for being disciples of Jesus and refusing to worship the Roman emperor. Some struggled with the temptation of assimilation, downplaying their Christian faith whenever it became an inconvenience or an impediment to being accepted by the culture they lived in. Still others were not facing any persecution or pressure. For them, things were going so well that they were tempted by complacency – why bother to worship regularly? Why bother to be concerned for my neighbor? Persecution isn’t a big issue for most of us, but the temptations of assimilation and complacency hit awfully close to home for suburban Americans like me, so John has had my close attention these past six weeks.

John's letter is a word of prophecy – not prophecy in the sense that it predicts the future, but prophecy in the sense of the Old Testament prophets who addressed the present situation of their audience with an authoritative, “Hear the Word of the Lord....” John uses a style of writing called “apocalyptic” that was common in that era. It is filled with visions, metaphors and poetic imagery that stretch the capacity of human language to describe the reality of evil and death, but also the limited nature of their power, for the Lord God is the only source of ultimate power, and in the life and death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, death and evil have been given their own death warrants.

That's where we have picked up the story this morning – Satan and the powers of death have been cast into a lake of fire, the dead have been raised to stand before their Creator and Redeemer, and John now describes the final scene of his vision. He sees a new heaven and a new earth – all of creation is renewed and freed from imperfections. John's writing instructor would have docked him a few points here, for in one sentence he uses a mixed metaphor of heaven being both a city and a woman: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” It's a strange image—a perfect city wearing a wedding dress, but John uses it to contrast God's kingdom with the images he used earlier for secular powers that put themselves in the place of God. He had called the Roman empire the “city of Babylon” and also pictured it as a drunken harlot. So now he depicts heaven as both the New Jerusalem, the holy city, and a bride, which is why the church is sometimes referred to as “the bride of Christ”.

There are many popular images of heaven that we are familiar with from cartoons, movies, or jokes. Heaven is people sitting on white, puffy clouds playing harps. Heaven is St. Peter sitting at the Pearly Gates, checking to see who has the proper credentials to get in. Heaven is whatever our particular idea of the perfect place would be – for some it is golf courses without sand traps, for others it's the music of Mozart, and some dream of an endless shopping spree with an unlimited credit card.

John begins describing the holy city by what it is not. It is a place where there are no tears, no pain, no death. There is no sea and no night, metaphors for chaos and emptiness. There isn't just one gate, but twelve gates and they are always open. And who comes through the gates? The kings of the earth and the nations, which is kind of surprising because John had said in an earlier vision that the kings of the earth and the nations were destroyed. But here they are, coming through the gates.

A perfect city would have all that is necessary for life. What is necessary for life? Water – and John says there is a river flowing with the water of life from the throne of God. During communion this morning we'll sing about all of us gathering some day at the river that flows from the throne of God.

What else is necessary for life? Light, so things can grow. John says there is no need for the sun in the city because the Lord God and the Lamb are the light.

There is no evil and no sin in the city. That doesn't mean that no one who sins is allowed to enter, for that would mean that the city would have a pretty sparse population and you and I would never see it. What it does mean is that all for whom the Lamb has died have been forgiven and redeemed, the former things have passed away, and we won't bring those sinful practices with us into the kingdom.

The vision of the holy city then fades away and John is back where he started, in conversation with his angelic tour guide. The angel assures John that the vision is trustworthy and true, and John begins to worship the angel. But the angel says, “Don’t do that. Weren’t you paying attention? That’s the point of whole vision, that’s what your readers need to hear. Worship God! No one else and no thing else – not the emperor, not idols, not power, not wealth. Worship God alone!”

And then an unidentified voice comes as if from off stage: “See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” Throughout Revelation, prophecy is known by what it does. True prophecy moves people to serve the true God and false prophecy draws people away from God. Revelation does not suggest that people receive blessing or “keep” the words of its prophecy by speculating about the date of the battle of Armageddon or the identity of the Antichrist. Rather, the blessed are those who “wash their robes” through faith in Christ and faithfulness to Christ, pursuing righteousness and resisting evil.

Then the voice comes again: “Behold, I am coming soon...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Now we get a better idea of who is speaking. John’s vision had opened with Jesus saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” He is at the beginning and end of John’s letter, and we see here another emphasis of the letter – that is, when John talks about the end of all things, we find that the end is not an event or a place, but a person; a person who loves us so deeply that he was willing to die for us. For those who have a fear of what “the end” might be, this is a great word of comfort – God in Christ will be waiting for us.

The voice comes a third time and this time leaves no doubt about his identity: “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The testimony that has been given is intended to both encourage and threaten--to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. For those experiencing persecution, John’s message is one of hope and assurance; that though the evil they are experiencing is real, God is indeed ultimately in control and God can be trusted to keep all God’s promises. For those struggling with assimilation or complacency, John’s message challenges them about the reality of the forces of sin and evil, especially as these manifest themselves in preoccupations with wealth, callousness towards violence, and the notion that it doesn’t really matter what one worships as “god”. John’s warnings are designed to shake up these readers and move them to repentance.

Revelation is not a script for a future drama that will be played out in lockstep fashion. To read it in that way turns faith into fatalism. There are indeed ominous visions in Revelation, but these are not simple predictions about the future, but warnings designed to move readers of every era to repentance and endurance.

To hear the letter of Revelation in its integrity means hearing the promises that God and the Lamb extend not just to a few but to those of every tribe and language and people and nation. Its vision is that all may come to recognize Christ, the Lamb who was slain for them.

John ends with a spirited invitation: *The Spirit and bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*

Each Sunday we gather around the table for “a foretaste of the feast to come.” And we respond to Christ’s promise to come with the closing words of Revelation, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” – come into our world, come into my life.

Pastor Chris and I have truly enjoyed immersing ourselves in this fascinating letter of Revelation the past six weeks. We have learned a lot and it has been a blessing to us. We hope the same is true for you.

John’s closing blessing is ours as well: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.”