

BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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“WHAT’S GOING ON”

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Scripture: Revelation 21:1-7

An elderly couple passed away and found themselves at the pearly gates. Peter was there to welcome them. First, he showed them their mansion. The husband, overwhelmed by the sheer luxury of it all, asked, “How much does this place cost per night?” Peter replied, “Sir, this is heaven, it doesn’t cost anything.” Then Peter took them to the dining room where table upon table was piled high with the most delicious foods you could imagine. Again, overwhelmed by the glory of it all, the man asked, “How much for the meals?” Peter said, “You forget, this is heaven, it’s free.” Peter then took them out back where they saw a fantastically beautiful golf course. As the man stood there open-mouthed, Peter said, “Now before you ask, there are no green fees, this is heaven, everything is free.” The man looked at his wife and said, “You and your confounded bran muffins, I could have been here 10 years ago!”

We imagine heaven to be a glorious, peaceful, beautiful place, and this vision we heard just a minute ago from John’s Revelation gives us an idea of why we imagine heaven in the ways that we do. And doesn’t it sound truly amazing? Beautiful like a bride dressed for her groom, no pain, or tears, or death. Yet did you notice the fact that John’s revelation doesn’t include pearly gates, or streets of gold, or mansions filled with the most succulent food? In this final imagery of heaven in the Bible, something else is emphasized; something, which I find to be far more glorious—a new heaven and a new earth, joined together around a Holy City, and at the center of this new city sits God, living (again) among humankind. Now that really sounds like heaven!

But for us to really appreciate the vision of heaven that we get in this passage from Revelation, I think we have to contrast it with the world we live in now. We’ve seen some pretty horrific pictures in the last few years, haven’t we? From bombings in our country and in other places around the world. We can’t forget them images of suffering and pain, of tears shed as we watch people flee in panic—think about the Boston Marathon. Natural disasters—floods, tornados, hurricanes, wild fires, and even erupting volcanos—that we watch destroy people’s lives and livelihoods. If they survive, they are left with

nothing but the clothes on their backs. We are confronted with pictures of a suffering and a mourning community. These are just a handful of snapshots in a world full of such stories. We all experience pain, or suffering, or tragedy at some point.

Marvin Gaye says it well... [Play clip from Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On"]

What are you going through this morning? Is there pain in your heart that is nearly unmanageable? Has someone hurt you deeply? Are you suffering from an illness, a disease? Do you have a daily battle with depression and anxiety? Are you so disgusted by the daily shootings in the news, the continuing occurrences of hate-filled acts like the shootings in our schools and the bombings in Boston that you feel there is little, if any, hope? Are you weeping over the state of our world? Are you hitting the wall right now, feeling like you can't go on, like you'll never make it?

A woman shares a story about her 7-year old daughter, Jessica. Jessica is a deep thinker when it comes to theological questions. Recently, as they were re-reading the story of Adam and Eve and how sin came into the world, Jessica and her mother discussed why bad things happen. Later that week, Jessica was sick and had to stay home from school. Feeling quite miserable, she told her Mom, "If only Adam and Eve hadn't eaten the fruit, I wouldn't be sick." And before her mother could answer, Jessica added, "Of course, if they didn't eat it, we'd all be sitting here naked!"

Of course, Adam and Eve's nakedness was a sign of their innocence and purity. And that innocence, that purity has been lost and distorted because of sin. We live in a broken world. Every time we turn on the TV or open the newspaper, our hearts are torn out of our chests. We read about children who are separated from their parents, or who have been abducted and trafficked, or we hear of mass shootings, or devastating earthquakes and volcanos. It's just about too horrible to even imagine. And yet, this is the world we live in.

But the promise of John's vision is that we can have hope in something far better, and at the center of it all is God, "the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." "The biblical story began, quite logically, with a beginning. Now it draws to an end, not quite so logically, also with a beginning," says Eugene Peterson. "The sin-ruined creation of Genesis that we know and experience is

restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of revelation,” the result in the first creation was “the heavens and the earth.” And the result in this ending creation is a “new heaven and new earth.”

My friends, this is a passage of strength and hope for desperate times! This is not just some rosy description of heaven that prompts one to comment, “Oh, isn’t that nice?” This is a promise about something better, far more wonderful than we can imagine. This vision is about change, and newness, and wholeness, and life! This is a promise that can lift us out of whatever devastation we may be experiencing and strengthen us with the knowledge that something new and wonderful lies ahead.

The description we have of this new heaven is a Holy City. But why a city? Cities are busy, and impersonal, and stressful. Cities are where gang fights and bombings happen. True, very, very true. So, again, I want to go back to some images we’ve seen in the last couple of months and years. I’ve seen pictures of a police officer carrying 2 gallons of milk to a family with small children who were on lockdown because of their proximity to Boston bombing site and the manhunt that was underway. I’ve seen pictures of rescue workers pull people out of harm’s way with only seconds to spare. I’ve seen pictures of what happens when we work together to bring about good. That’s a beautiful picture. Not unlike the one John paints for us here.

The New Jerusalem, a Holy City, and perhaps we can understand better now why. Because cities are places where people live together in dependence on one another. A city works when everyone in it does something to contribute to its welfare: when a cop delivers some milk, and a citizen calls in a suspicious sight in his boat, first responders work together to keep the people safe, and the people cheer them on in great thanksgiving. A city is the welcome place where people arrive home at the end of a long and confusing journey. And, John’s Revelation tells us, this Holy City is where God lives. And it is because of God’s presence that pain, suffering, mourning, and crying are ended. Through Jesus Christ, God wipes away everything that terrorizes us.

In fact, the vision describes the Holy City (in one way, at least) by noting what is not in it. After the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, John says, “the sea is no more.” The sea is a powerful biblical symbol for chaos, and for good reason. You see, the Israelites and new Christians in the ancient

Middle East were not seafarers. They were more or less land-locked, and except for the fishermen who would row a little ways out and drop their nets, they were not equipped to handle the tumultuous waters. They didn't know how to pilot great ships, or even how to swim. To them, the sea was a dark and scary place full of evil. And the sea also represents what separates humans from one another. So part of the beauty of this dry, new Jerusalem is that there are no stormy seas to terrorize lives and keep people from one another. Here, God and human beings live in peaceful, harmonious relationship with one another.

And this is where we really get to the wonderful promise of this passage. The sea was the terror of ancient peoples, but we all deal with different terrors today. We have seen bombings and explosions, and natural disasters; these are broad examples among countless unnoticed, forgotten, and smaller tragedies. Relationships grow cold and sour, and end; hurt and disappointment come from those we love; life seems to be unjust or senseless; we don't get the answers we hope for; failure and discouragement mar our great intentions. We know chaos and terror quite intimately; as John reminds us, we know all too well the reality of tears, pain, sadness, darkness, suffering, and death. But here is our hope, the great promise of John's vision; just as God takes away the sea that was the sign of such chaos in the ancient world; so in the new heaven, God takes away our chaos—the bombs, the explosions, the hurricanes, the earthquakes, the volcanos, the depression—everything, all the way through to death, it's gone, too.

If we can have faith in the truth, then the words that we hear today in Revelation have the power to become such life-altering words for God's people, and especially for all who find themselves in the midst of struggles and turmoil. "Then the one seated on the throne said, 'Look! I'm making all things new.' ...Then he said to me, 'All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.'" These are words that matter at the heart of life, where we questions who we are and who God is. These are the words that give hope when all seems lost. They promise us that there will be a new day when all that has hurt us will be gone, and we will live face-to-face with the God who loves us immeasurably.

"Behold! I am making all things new!"

Praise be to God. Amen.