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God Among Us

JENNIFER HALE CHRISTY

This sermon was delivered on Thursday, May 2, 2013 in Stauffer Chapel as part of the Pepperdine Bible Lectures.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth¹ 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 death² 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.” (Rev 21.1–6)

The Word of the Lord

I love the passion that John the Seer has as he recounts his visions. A new heaven and a new earth. Don’t you just wonder what he saw? I imagine the earth as we know it—maybe as it appears from satellites, but completely pristine—untouched by human hands.

No skyscrapers or congestion; no urban sprawl and highways that crisscross like the computer cables under your desk. No hateful graffiti and worn-out buildings. No abandoned churches and burned-out cars. No junkyards and landfills and smog.

No road noise, honking horns, and sirens. No hums of machinery and loud jackhammers. No beeping of the heart monitor, no code blue. No cities that reek with the stench of other people’s garbage, and neighborhoods that are polluted by the mass processing of animal by-products. No toxic dumping that gives birth to cancer in innocents.

No more miscarriages, no more stillborn babies. No more heart disease, dementia, Alzheimer’s, leukemia, Parkinson’s, or AIDS. No more death! That is the old earth that is passing away...

But God promises that a new day is dawning and one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And this new earth is lush, full of life, and blooming with creativity. It is buzzing with insects of every kind and chirping with thousands of different kinds of birds. We can hear the elephants stomping down to the water hole at night, and the lions crying out. And there is no fear. Because everyone is a vegan! I’m not making this up!

1. Isaiah 65.17

2. Isaiah 25.8

Isaiah 65 says the lion will eat straw and dust will be the serpent's food. No one attacks or eats each other—all are living in peace and harmony. The lion lies down with the lamb, and the child plays near the cobra's den.

The former Ku Klux Klan member and the Civil Rights Activist share a table and break bread. Those for and against California's Prop 8 look into each other's eyes and see each other as beloved children of God. They will neither harm nor destroy on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

People of all tribes, languages, colors, shapes, and sizes come together in the Holy City to offer praise to God Most High. This Holy City—the New Jerusalem—comes down from heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband and it is the embodiment of God with us. "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and he will be their God!"³

And we hear this beautiful echo of Ruth and Naomi, where Ruth is the daughter-in-law who chooses to stay with Naomi when others have left. Just as Ruth stayed to care for Naomi ("Where you go I will go.... Your people will be my people...."⁴), God comes to live among us. God lives among us in the Garden of Eden. Eve and Adam walk with God in the cool of the evening. Jesus, as God incarnate, lives among us and prays in the Garden of Gethsemane—praying on behalf of the world, God's beloved children who have gone astray. God comes to live among his people.

And this incarnate God wipes away tears. He sees each tear that falls, and he hears us when we call. He has seen the tears, and he has shed tears for us. In our anger and our hurt, when we cry out to God to make sense of this, to explain why things are the way they are—sometimes he just weeps with us. But in this new heaven and new earth, he wipes the tears away for the last time and declares that there will be no more tears.

This new heaven and new earth is good news for us—and it gets better the older we get and the more we come to terms with our own mortality. It gets better and our desire for it gets stronger the more we struggle in this life. The more we hurt, the more we grieve for others. The more loss we experience. The more we are confronted with sickness and death.

This is a new reality where there will be no more death, no more tears. Nothing to grieve, nothing to cry over—can you imagine such an existence? What hope and what joy comes from looking and leaning into that future...

This is the new earth. John describes it to us as best he can. God dwells with us and we dwell with him. We dwell in his new creation, and in Christ we have become a new creation. Christ has broken down all the barriers that divide.

"No more death or mourning or crying or pain"—do we get what that means? No more of those things that grieve us. No more loss, no more oppression, no more feeling 'less than' because of your race, color, gender, sexual preference.... No, the old order of things has passed away. The patriarchy, the hierarchy, the order of subjugation—it has all passed away. And all are one in Christ. Christ himself has torn down the dividing wall of hostility.

And he has conquered sin, disease, and sickness—the things that grieve us. He has conquered death—that which formerly divided us from our loved ones. He has torn down all the barriers and made us all one in him.

At the end of our passage for today, the one who is seated on the throne says, "It is done." It is finished. The words of Jesus on the cross that seemed to pronounce a certain finality—that he and his mission had been defeated once and for all. It is finished. But those words were in fact a pronouncement of God's saving work that was accomplished through Jesus' crucifixion. In three days, his father would raise him from the dead, thus displaying once and for all that death had been conquered—that *that* was finished. And just as God raised Jesus from the dead, the promise was extended to all who believe—that all would be raised to new life in this New Jerusalem.

But I really want to see this vision that John saw. Because I look around and what I see are so many grasping for power and desperate to hang onto it. I look around and I see people unwilling to budge on issues of justice. I see people living in fear—fear that if they do this or don't do that, people will leave or withdraw their support. But I want to catch John's vision of this New Jerusalem.

3. Revelation 21.3

4. Ruth 1.16

And so I wonder, what is God up to in our midst? What are we to do with this beautifully intriguing little passage from Revelation? Do we put it off somewhere in the future, just something nice to sing about when times get tough—*no tears in heaven fair*⁵? We sing about it but it has no bearing on our daily lives?

I think we lean into it now.⁶ Because we are so sure that God has indeed conquered sin and death once and for all that we live now the way we will live in the New Jerusalem. The Holy City where things are set right. And we do everything in our power *to relinquish our power for the sake of the powerless*. As we lean into the New Jerusalem, we seek to put an end to injustice and oppression wherever they may be because we serve and put our faith in a god who says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”⁷ A god who says “I have told you what is good—to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”⁸ A god who says let justice roll down like a mighty water.⁹

In this New Jerusalem, the King dwells with his people. He gives free water—living water from the spring of life—to all who are thirsty. He intimately wipes away tears and powerfully tears down walls that divide. The word of the Lord!¹⁰

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5. From the old COC hymn, “No Tears in Heaven.”

6. *Lean into* is a contemporary American idiom meaning to “step into” or “walk into” a new reality.

7. Hosea 6.6

8. Micah 6.8

9. Paraphrase of Amos 5.24.

10. It’s a standard proclamation in liturgical churches for the speaker to say, “The word of the Lord!” at the conclusion of a Scripture reading or sermon, to which the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God!”