

A River, Bright as Crystal
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Some years ago, Dan and I visited our former congregation in Columbus at a time when the youth were having a fundraising auction. The pastors of the congregation had put an interesting item up for bids: a sermon. They were offering to preach a sermon on any text the high bidder chose. There was one limitation. It could not be from the book of Revelation. They would not preach on Revelation at any price.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

I. Why think about ultimate goals?

Today I am going to preach on Revelation and talk about a topic that most of today's Mennonite Church has tacitly agreed not to talk about. What kind of end are we headed toward?

Why would a 21st century Mennonite, steeped in the Sermon on the Mount and practical aspects of the Gospel want to take on this speculative topic? Isn't it all about crackpot predictions? Last month, on May 21, we checked our watches at 5:55 p.m. and waited to see if the world would end on schedule. It didn't. Why would we even try to talk about end times?

The question of our ultimate destination intrigues me right now for a number of reasons. For one thing, the logic of this month's Creation Waits series demands an ending. If we're going to talk about how creation waits, laboring and longing for fulfillment, at some point we need to describe as best we can what that fulfillment looks like.

Secondly, I keep running into people and situations where the end goal matters. I'm working on a college class for my job at Merry Lea right now, and I recently attended Goshen College's Course Development Institute. In this workshop, we were not allowed to think about the *content* of our courses or the activities we would engage in until we could answer this question: "How do you want your students to be different when the class is over?" Only with this end goal in mind could we shape the rest of the experience in ways that would realize that goal. Perhaps this is true for the life of faith also. Educators call it "backwards design;" theologians call it "eschatology."

A third reason I am drawn to the text we are about to read is that I work in a field that is very concerned about the future. I work with environmental professionals and they are shaking in their boots right now, watching mounting populations intersect with global climate change and our relentless demands for energy.

From a scientific perspective, the future looks *grim* for both humans and creation as a whole. A colleague of mine just returned from the Alberta tar sands and showed us pictures of a gray wasteland stretching as far as the eye could see. Some of you may have seen a recent *National Geographic* article that contrasted pictures of a healthy coral reef with a place on the ocean floor where carbon dioxide vents mimic the level of acidification expected in the oceans by 2100. Again, it was a wasteland. I'm in the market for alternatives!

With these three points in mind, let's hear the prophetic vision that gets the last word in the Christian scriptures:

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See reading: Revelation 21:1-5; 10-22 condensed; 19:8, 22:1-7

II. What kind of future hope does this vivid imagery at the end of the Bible offer us?

First of all, **John's vision of the future is a stubborn, scrappy, totally irrational, in-your-face, won't-take-no-for-an-answer kind of a vision.** It is *intended* to speak to a grim present. That is how apocalyptic literature functions. These kinds of visions are given to us when things seem hopeless. John wrote this text some years after Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 A.D. The Jerusalem he knew was nothing like this beautiful bride of a city. Not only was the city itself in ruins; the surrounding landscape was a wasteland. The Romans were known for deforesting the lands they conquered and the conquest of Jerusalem was no exception. The Roman military clear-cut all the beautiful parks and forests surrounding Jerusalem, to use the wood for siege works.

I can't imagine a solution to global climate change and our many other environmental problems. So I take comfort in the fact that there are those among us, past and present, gifted with seeing God's stubborn determination to heal and to redeem even when things look desperate.

The second thing to keep in mind is that **John's vision of the future is a thoroughly Jewish vision.** It draws its hope from a palette of symbols and imagery that is no longer familiar to us. Just out of curiosity, how many of you have read the book of I Enoch in the last five years? Baruch? Here's an easy one: Ezekiel 47. No? Well, folks, we are at a disadvantage here. We have a completely different frame of reference than the original listeners did.

For example, if you recall the dimensions of the holy city in John's vision, the city is completely square. Judy and I were discussing this text this week and she said to me, "You know, that cube descending from heaven reminds me a little bit of the Borg in Star Trek."

We laughed, but I could still hear John, rolling over in his grave saying, "No, no!

You're *supposed* to think of the holy of holies!" The holy of holies, was the place in the Jewish temple where God was most fully present. It too was a perfect cube. And it was so sacred that only the high priest could enter once a year. In John's vision, the whole city becomes a sacred place filled with the presence of God.

This passage is laced with little tidbits like that. If we had time, it would be fascinating (at least for some of us) to compare how John's vision tweaks Ezekiel's earlier vision of a restored Jerusalem in ways that open doors and include all peoples, not just Jews.

All the same, I am quite sure that God loves us and wants to communicate with us even if we *don't* spend our weekends reading ancient literature. I suspect that if God were to send one of us a vision of the future today, it would be in language we understand. It might even revolve around a new Goshen or a new Elkhart or a new Berkey Avenue. **The good future God has in mind for us whoever and wherever we are, grows out of a particular past and a particular present and transforms them.**

Thirdly, in John's vision, heaven is not a place to escape to; heaven comes to earth. The picture here is not an airlift out of a ruined mess that God has given up on: it is our own familiar planet restored to what it was supposed to be in the first place. This is what we pray for when we say the Lord's prayer: your reign *on earth* come: HERE. Somehow, by the grace of God, this unknown, not fully realized reality breaks into our own place and becomes the norm.

Some of you may say, "Wait a minute. Doesn't this picture contradict the idea of the rapture? Don't we go to "meet the Lord in the air," as it says in Thessalonians? If this is an idea that has given you problems, you might find it comforting to know that the rapture is not a doctrine like the resurrection that is common to Christians in all times and places. While it occurs many places in the popular media, it is drawn from just a few verses in I Thessalonians 4, and there is another way to look at those verses. This is a metaphorically rich passage that alludes to the Israelites going out to meet God when God's presence descends on Sinai. It also uses a Greek phrase that referred to the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary. The picture an ancient reader would have understood from the passage is of proper etiquette. When the king or queen comes to visit your city, you don't sit in your house waiting; you go out to meet them and escort them back.

John's vision of the new Jerusalem gives us no grounds for giving up on our present world and waiting for a ride out of here; if anything, we might want to get ready for company and tidy up the place.

Fourth, and along those same lines, John's vision of the future includes creation. It depicts a blending of creation and human civilization. In this beautiful vision, there's a clean, clear river, running right down the middle of Main St. And it's got this lush growth of trees growing all around it, and there's always fruit to pick. Here, human beings have found a way to live *with* creation without crushing it. In return, it nourishes us.

Fifth, John's vision of heaven is one of simple abundance.

What makes heaven heaven?

Clean water...
abundant food...
beauty, color, light...
healing, peace.

This is a more-with-less heaven, very different from the way John depicts the city of Babylon, with slaves and luxury goods flowing into it. In John's vision, there's a crystal-clear river flowing from the throne of God and *the necessities of life are free gifts*.

Now if that point doesn't strike you, contrast how humans approach water if you give them a chance. Much could be said about the privatization of water and the wars that have been and will be fought over water, but I will content myself with a homely example.

Yesterday at the grocery store, I found a bottle of Fiji Water. Fiji Water is imported from...Fiji. Does anybody other than Ron Good even know where Fiji is? Don't feel badly if you don't, because Fiji is on the other side of the world, due north of New Zealand. Never mind that we already have water here in Goshen, IN. Never mind that the Great Lakes region is the Saudi Arabia of fresh water. Somebody figured out that they could take some oil, make it into bottles and ship them to Fiji. Then, they could put water in the bottles in Fiji, use some more oil and ship those bottles 7300 miles to Goshen, Indiana. Then, somebody, who could afford it, would buy that pint of water at 1900 times the cost of tap water. It works. The people who own this company are billionaires. God love us, we are such a clever species.

According to the documentary, *Tapped*, eighteen million barrels of oil are used each year in the U.S. to transport bottled water. There's a half cup of oil in every bottle.

One more thing that makes the earth into heaven: the presence of God. **In John's vision of the future, God is present, palpable, real.** Dan talks a lot about intimacy with God, so I'm not going to belabor this point, but *imagine* what that would be like. To feel like God lived in your neighborhood? Let's just admit it: there are many days on our current planet where the existence of God seems like a long shot. But here in Revelation, we see God's face. What would that be like?

In summary, Revelation 21 and 22 present us with a vision of the future that defies our despair about the present, even as it is shaped by a particular past and present. It is a vision that embraces our planet and all its living things and natural systems. It is a vision that challenges our notions about the way we share the earth's resources, and about what is really worth having. And, it is a vision that wraps us in the presence of God.

I leave you with this question, and a few tentative answers:

III. If this vision is “trustworthy and true,” as Rev. 22 says, what might happen if we embraced it? If this is the end goal we are headed toward, how can we walk in the right direction?

We might, through those little cracks in time in between work and kids activities, seek to know the God who is coming to live with us.

If this vision is “trustworthy and true,” our sense of mission might reflect care for rivers and trees as well as humans. We might work at ways of integrating nature and civilization and be suspicious of any endeavor that assumes we must wipe out the first in order to have the second.

If this vision is what God had in mind all along, we might oppose legislation that makes the necessities of life into commodities sold to the highest bidder.

We might give up products like bottled water.

We might find ourselves more hopeful, more energized, more willing to invest in our planet here and now. Note that John’s heavenly city is “founded on the work of the apostles” and “clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints.” N.T. Wright, in his book, *Surprised by Hope*, says that if heaven is coming here, we are not like people who are planting a rose garden only to have it torn up as a building site. No, he says, we are more like sculptors, working on a cathedral that may not be completed in our lifetimes. You’re carving a gargoyle over here and you’re reinforcing an arch over there and we can’t yet see how these pieces are all going to fit together. But someday they will. Another commentator, Eugene Boring puts it this way: “Every ditch dug, every brick laid, every vote cast, every committee decision that has contributed to the decency of human life is preserved and built into the eternal city.”

I don’t know how God will bring about the fulfillment of John’s vision. I don’t know how or when the reign of God that we pray for will come. I suspect it will be something like what Susan was talking about with the children this morning. God will take things we see only as bulbs or buds or shriveled brown seeds and will expand them into shapes and colors we never imagined.

Our song of response is an old song that speaks about the river in Revelation 22. It was popular in my parents’ era, and they were fond of it. It’s often used as a funeral song, and we sang it at both of their funerals.

But today, I’d like us to sing this song with a different focus: sing it for the Elkhart River. This is the vision God has in mind for the Elkhart River. *Seek* that beautiful stream. Ω

Sources: Below are the three sources I relied on the most.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation* in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*.

Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

A Few Other Biblical Texts that Relate to the Imagery in this Passage:

Genesis 1:1, 29-31 and 2:6, 10

Joel 3:2

Isaiah 55:1

Jeremiah 2:13

Psalms 46:4-5

Psalms 104:10-13

Ezekiel 47:1-12

John 4:10