

What is New?
Revelation 21:1-6

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So here we are ... at the *end* of the *last* book of the Bible. The second-to-last chapter of the book of Revelation. *Revelation!* That book that has always seemed so mysterious and quirky and symbolic and intimidating and let's be honest: just plain *odd*. Even Martin Luther—the father of the Reformation and precursor to our reformed faith—said he wished Revelation had not been included in the Canon. But it *is* in our Scriptures, and thus it is part of our faith and is yet another way to express and experience and perceive God and his saving grace. And I'm glad it is.

Many of you have spent the last month hearing sermons from this “odd” book of visions. And today we bring that to a close. We are ending the book—indeed ending the *Bible*—with the words:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...” It is the final vision.

The Bible begins with the words, “In the beginning God *created the heavens and the earth...*” (Gen 1:1) The biblical story starts with a wonderful creation, and that creation is a garden. The biblical story began, quite logically, with a *beginning*.

And now it draws to end—not quite so logically—also with a *beginning*.

Four times in five verses it says, “new.” What is new?

T.S. Elliot once wrote (in *Little Gidding*), “What we call the beginning is often the end, And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

John writes, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ...”

John of Patmos announces this new heaven and earth, then describes that the “first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” Now when we use the term “pass away,” we mean that someone or something has died. Pass away means death. But here the term doesn't so much speak of the *death of heaven and earth*, rather *death itself* passes away. Death will be no more. Later he will write, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. It points us to eternal life; life without death.

He also writes, “And there was no longer any sea.”

What? No sea? No ocean and beach ... no sandcastles and boogie boarding and surfing and playing in the waves?? As one who is a lover of the beach and the ocean, this is distressing. But a brief understanding is necessary. In the ancient Jewish world, the sea was seen as the symbol of turbulence and chaos and hostility; (we even see this image in Revelation itself, in chapter 13). The sea was considered a place filled with monsters and demons and all kinds of evil things. So it was a scary place. Certainly not the beauty of the ocean and the beaches that so many of us are familiar with. I have no idea if there will be beaches in this new heaven and earth, but there will *not* be chaos and evil and frightening, intimidating things.

This will be a new heaven and new earth.

To use the words of Eugene Peterson: “The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of Revelation.” (Peterson, p. 169)

It seems the new creation—the *new* heaven and the *new* earth—will have some kind of continuity with creation as we know it, yet it will also be radically different. (Metzger)

Let's think about what is "new," and this picture, this vision, this wholly-other that the Revelation to John gives us.

We read, "And I saw the holy city, the *new* Jerusalem ..."

Remember the first creation began with a garden, a simple and lovely place with two trees and two people in it.

In the new creation, we are given the vision of a *city*. A city! Not a mountain top or a forest!

First no beaches and now a city?

But let's think about cities. I happen to be person who loves cities—having grown up near San Francisco, and lived in Los Angeles, and in Philadelphia, and yes, Salt Lake City. I've also spent significant time in London and Edinburgh and Jerusalem. But I also know there are many who would consider cities-and-heaven as mutually exclusive; oxymoronic. Cities aren't heavenly ... are they? Yet, this vision of the new heaven and earth is a *city*.

Cities are where there are lots of people, and lots of *kinds* of people. And lots of kinds of people live together. Interestingly the vision is not of several cities, or suburbia, or sprawl, but of one city, and the city is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is both historical and new. God's people know Jerusalem. And in this New Jerusalem, God's people living together as one. It's a holy city, not only because God is there, but because God's people are there—the crown of God's first creation are no longer divided and alienated from God, or from one another. All the beauty of God's people are gathered and dwelling together with God in one beautiful holy city—the new Jerusalem, which is no other than *the Church*.

And this New Jerusalem, this renewed and beautifully adorned and holy city, comes as a *bride*. It is the Church being wed to Christ is some form of cosmic union that is dominated by the presence of God.

It may seem surprising, but there is nothing in the book of Revelation about going up to heaven. There is nothing about floating off up into the sky. There is no mention of rapture. Rather, John "saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming *down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." The holy city comes down. In this culmination of the Revelation, it's not about being pulled away from this earth, it's about God drawing close to this earth.

In John's vision, the final hope is not that we go up to heaven when we die. Salvation is not us going to God, but *God coming to us*. There is no longer a divided kingdom, with God and his angels somewhere "up there" while we mere humans stumble along down here on earth. The gap between God and humanity that was bridged by Jesus's death is now made quite literal and real in this vision.

God's plan was always to be with us, to love us, and live with us in close relationship; that was set out in Genesis.

But it is not until this final image that there is a perfect culmination of Christ's purpose.

The incarnation of Jesus was God's coming to the first earth—to his sin-stained creation—to bring redemption. Now in this vision there is a new earth and a new heaven.

This is a more radical, curious, and wonderful vision of the New Creation than most of us can get our head around.

The other night I was at dinner with a group of friends, and somewhat out of the blue one of the friends asked—what do you think heaven will be like?

- One talked about seeing loved ones ... especially his mom.
- Another ... presence of Jesus—but what is that like?
- Seeing light and near death experiences and mysterious visions and voices that people have experienced.

It's not just about future hope, but future wonder and awe at just how wholly-other, w-h-o-l-l-y other and Holy Other, h-o-l-y other, eternity with God will be.

If this part of the vision is one that we struggle to get our heads around, the words that come next are those that we cling to:

“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 has passed away.”

Someday, somehow, I will be in the presence of God. God will dwell with me. In the Greek, the word for “dwell” and “home,” are the same word. It is the word for “tabernacle.” Something very definite is being suggested. When Israel wandered in the wilderness, they set up a tabernacle to hold the Ark of the Covenant where the presence of God *dwelt/tabernacled*. Remember in John 1—“the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us”? Same word for dwelt ... which was John’s way of saying that the same presence of God that dwelt in the tabernacle of the Hebrew people, dwelt in Jesus. And now in Revelation...we see God *himself* making a home ... dwelling with ...”tabernacling” with his people. The emphasis is on the direct, tangible, mighty presence of God...and the reality that he wants to and will be **with us**.

And ... God himself will wipe our tears.

Think about tears for a moment. One of the first things that we humans do, is shed tears. We enter this world—crying! Nobody teaches us to cry, nobody is exempt from crying. If we are rich and famous... if we are poor and desperate... If we have a PhD,, if we didn’t finish high school.... If we own a mansion and summer home... if we find a piece of cardboard on the street.... Senior citizens cry and teenagers cry and middle aged white women cry and yes, football players and politicians and doctors cry. Hezekiah cried, Jeremiah cried, John cried. Even Jesus cried. And they all cried and we all cry because we feel pain—whether it is physical or emotional, whether it’s grief or remorse or just plain sorrow.

But there is a time coming when there will be no more tears.

(That doesn’t mean that God is going to dry up our tear ducts.)

No, it means that in this new heaven and the new earth, when the holy city of God’s people are united with Jesus and God is dwelling there ...

There will be no reason for tears. No more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. That old way will be gone. Behold all things will be made new.

Note it is not that there will be all new things, but that all things, will be made new.

God's own hand will wipe away every tear. God will touch us. He will touch us in empathy, compassion, and tenderness. He won't send an angel to do it. He won't clap his hands and supernaturally make them disappear. He himself will take his hand...touch us...and wipe the tears away. That is this new heaven and new earth.

There is so much of Revelation, and so much even in pondering heaven, eternity, perpetual presence of God, that we just cannot grasp. But maybe we are not meant to grasp it. Because how could one with a finite mind, grasp that which is infinite and eternal?

Maybe all we can do, is when we are in the midst of the deepest despair, in those moments when victory seems impossible, when we can't see any way forward, when it seems that the world and its evil is winning, we can remember the end of the Book of Revelation and one triumphant message that we can hold on to with absolute certainty: God will dwell with us; and we with him. And God will make all things new.