

Revelation 21: 1-6
Rev. Sharon Smith
Nov 4th, 2018
All Saints Day transferred

Objectives:

- To reflect on our images of heaven and earth
 - To explore what it means for heaven to come to earth
 - To highlight the gritty process and hard work of embodying a vision - Christ with us, in us, through us (incarnational theology)
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A new heaven and a new earth.
The sea of chaos and tears and pain is no more.
And Jerusalem, that Holy City descends from God.

What evocative imagery! What cryptic imagery.
We might not think so anymore because we have gotten used to it.
Ideas of Heaven and Earth, The Sea. Jerusalem.

We have even put poems to music that speak of Jerusalem in our time, to try to understand this imagery.

Jerusalem

by William Blake

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

Bring me my bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

In some way, we have tamed these images.
Made them familiar and weakened the impact.

Today, in the words of New Testament Prof. Harry Maiers, I want us to discover these images afresh.

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“To seek to understand the ways that we read Revelation and the way that Revelation indeed reads us.”

For it does have something to say to us in this place and in this time.

I agree with Harry Maiers when he says that this book (as difficult as it is to read) “Is indispensable to mainstream first-world churches... struggling to come to terms with their institutional mortality. [For it is] here we [could] find the courage to envision new ways of being in society and face the fact that we no longer inhabit the halls of privilege.”

We have tended to think that Revelation’s images and prophesy resonate more strongly with Christians who are experiencing persecution. But Maiers says that “Amid the ruins of Christendom, Revelation – the full and bloody version – is the book of the hour” ... *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* by Harry O. Maier

So.. let us open our imaginations and not rely on learnt concepts. Let’s attempt the beginners mind together.

Imagine if we had no prior concept of **heaven**. And we came to this chapter in Revelation 21.

In the Greek we would have two options:

Heaven (‘ouranos’) could mean:

- (1) either the visible sky over us or
- (2) the invisible realm of God invading us.**

Only the context would determine which one it was.

Well the context does tell us more:

“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals”

It doesn’t make sense if it were the sky.

So... it is the second translation where heaven is – **the invisible realm of God invading us.**

The interesting part of this, is that it is in the present tense. Saint John on the small Island of Patmos saw a vision and while he describes the seeing of his vision in the past tense – I saw, I heard.

The vision itself is written in the present continuous tense - It is happening now and it continues to happen. It is always already and always still unfolding.

Eugene Peterson’s (now a departed Saint) rather famous modern translation of this text is superb: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!”
The Message Rev 21: 3

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Heaven understood this way is not only a concept of heaven that will be an experience when we die. But more accurate to Saint John is his vision of Heaven coming to Earth now.

The invisible realm of God invading us now.

Eugene Peterson writes:

- In the Gospels when the heavens are open we are able to see, and hear what we did not see and hear before – think of God’s affirmation of Jesus at his baptism;
- Beyond and through what we see, there is that which we cannot see. It is not ‘out there’ but it is right here among us.
- Heaven is the metaphor that tells us that there is far more here than meets the eye.
- Calling it a metaphor does not make heaven any less real, it simply recognises that it is inaccessible at this point to any of our 5 senses.

Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and Praying Imagination by Eugene Peterson

So, if heaven is the things of God breaking into our earth, our community, our families, our lives. What does it look like?

When the invisible becomes visible...

The justice of God becomes our present day justice

The comfort of God - our present day comfort

The peace of God - our present day peace

The compassion of God - our present day compassion

The light of God becomes our present day light when we feel lost.

Sometimes the things of God break in, in our doing, in our worship, in our seeking.

There are intricate and deep continuities between earth and heaven, between what we see and what we don’t see. The flow goes both ways.

It’s like heaven and earth kiss.

And sometimes heaven and earth meet in the least likely places.

Perhaps when we sense the presence of the people who have passed on before us, who have passed into the realm of God (heaven) when ‘the saints’ are especially close.

Perhaps it’s what the Celtic tradition calls “Thin” places.

Christine Valters Paintner says that especially during the feasts of All Saints and All Souls on when we honor the profound legacy of wisdom our ancestors have left to us.

We can be held in a thin space.

Interestingly these feasts coincide with the Celtic feast of *Samhain* which marks the beginning of the dark half of the year in the northern hemisphere and is a festival of the final harvest and

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remembering the dead. These moments on the great turning of the year's wheel is believed to be a "thin place" where the ancestors are especially accessible to us across the veil.

Abby of the Arts online reference: <https://abbeyofthearts.com>

And somehow in these times, the realm of God breaks in a particularly mystical type experience.

For me other thin places are:

- The Altar during the Eucharistic prayer: I couldn't get through the prayer without crying when I was training to be a Priest because I would feel the closeness of God and those who I have loved and lost. I think we have experienced that here a few times!
- Interestingly in my research on schizophrenia: I found the times when my research participants were trusting me with their spiritual visions, it was a very thin place. And I wondered if their minds were particularly thin spaces – the unseen things were breaking in. And yet held by such fragility.
- When I walk a labyrinth it is a thin place for me. I get clarity and see images that are helpful.
- Or when I visit monasteries or retreat centres – somehow heaven and earth kiss in these places.

So if our vision of heaven shifted to those mysterious things of God breaking into our lives. How does that actually help us as people following Christ, in a world where being church is changing rapidly?

Perhaps the key is in the image of the Holy City descending from God. This new Jerusalem. In Christendom, this imagery was taken somewhat literally – let's build great churches, let's make the whole world Christian.

What if this metaphor offers us a different alternative?

What if it's a metaphor of the process of embodying a vision. Any vision.

Once again Eugene Peterson's words are helpful here:

He writes:

"Heaven is not simply a dream to retreat to when things get messy, heaven is not a fantasy"

He goes on to say that "the vision of heaven is thoroughly practical"

Because it comes in the form of a city.

Not a garden, not Arcadia.

No its not a retreat place – you know when we want retreat we leave the city to go out to nature. No, heaven is like a city descending from God!

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Heaven is formed out of a city.

Formed out of the places we know.

The noisy places with dirty streets and murderous alleys, adulterous bedrooms, and corrupt courts, hypocritical and commercialized churches, and thieving tax collectors.

This is the stuff out of which heaven is formed.

God breaks into these places. Moment by moment.

Not in some grand display.

You know when I get an idea – usually it's an idealized image.

- Oh let me get a PhD. And I imagine this romantic picture of studying and reading my favourite books, writing flowing sentences and receiving glowing reviews.
When actually it was late nights of rewrites, scrolling through indexes of journal articles
Waiting anxiously for feedback, which almost always said – getting there but not quite.

- When God gives a community a vision or calls us in a particular direction.
It will never be the ideal we imagine.
It is formed out of the stuff we do, the place we are in.
The hard work, the broken system, the hard relationship, the leaky building.
Meetings that go well, meetings that don't go well
Budgets that look good and budgets that don't make the cut.

I was particularly aware of this yesterday at the investiture of new members to the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster. People doing ordinary things – climbing ladders, balancing budgets, visiting those who are sick, setting the table, greeting new comers.

This my friends is Jerusalem descending. It is a picture of God breaking into our now.

Into the mess, into the chaos. **The invisible realm of God invading us now.**

And surprising us with a newness in it all.

Will you join me in opening up to God all around us, heaven all around us.

Longing for what is to come but also expecting Christ's coming every moment of every day.

Even in our chaos of finding our way into our future.

Trusting God that somehow these words are trustworthy and true.

"Behold, I am making all things new"

Amen.