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# “Is Heaven ‘Up’?”

A SERMON on Revelation 21:1-6 for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C  
Preached 18 May 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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“Lord, I don't know how this happened,” prayed a kid named Isaiah, “so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us.”

As some of you may have heard me tell before, these were the words of a prayer uttered one night some number of years ago on a football field down in Grapevine, Texas. Isaiah, the one who led the prayer, was the quarterback of the Tornados, the football team from the Gainesville State School. His Tornados had just lost 33 to 14 to the Lions of Grapevine's Faith Christian School. The loss wasn't much of a surprise; after all, Faith Christian's team had seventy players, eleven coaches, the latest equipment, and oodles of involved parents. They were 7-and-2 that season, a pretty good record. The Gainesville State team, on the other hand, had arrived in tattered uniforms with shoulder pads some 7 years old and helmets perhaps even older. Their record was 0-and-8. And so, losing again—especially to *this* team—was undoubtedly what they had been expecting.

What Isaiah and the rest of the team from Gainesville State had *not* been expecting, though, was to take the field by running through a 40-yard “spirit line” of fans, all “borrowed” from Faith Christian. Neither had they expected the break-away banner they got to crash through at the end, emblazoned “Go Tornados!”, *also* made for them by the folks from Faith Christian. Nor had they been expecting to have some 200 fans sitting on the bleachers behind their side of the field, and even a full-on cheerleader squad cheering for them, each player by their name even. Those adoring fans, whose yells and cheers Isaiah and his teammate could hear from their bench, they too were all Faith Christian people.

After all, they would have had to have been... the only people that had come to the game with the 14 players from Gainesville State were the 12 uniformed officers who had removed their handcuffs before the game, and who stood ready to put them back on when it was time to leave.

You see, Gainesville State School is a maximum-security correctional facility for youth, some 75 miles north of Dallas. Whereas supportive families and generous budgets stood behind the Faith Christian team, all that stood for the Gainesville State kids were their convictions for drugs, assault, or robbery.<sup>1</sup>

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There's the old saying: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” For once, this is one of those biblical-sounding quotes that actually *does* come from the Bible itself, taken from the old King James Version's rendering of a verse in the book of Proverbs. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” I myself can hardly even begin to imagine the sense of perishing that perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> This story of the Gainesville State vs. Faith Christian football game was recounted by Rick Reilly for *ESPN: The Magazine* and, drawing upon Reilly's report, also told by Kenda Creasy Dean in, among other places, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. My retelling quotes from and draws generously upon both Reilly's and Dean's accounts. Rick Reilly, “Gainesville State high school football gets the best gift of all: hope”, *ESPN: The Magazine* (28 December 2008), <https://www.espn.com/espn/rickreilly/news/story?id=3789373>. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press USA, 2010), p. 85-87.

many of the Tornadoes players and other kids at Gainesville State School regularly felt. Not only were they facing incarceration for serious crimes, and so had lost the trust of society around them, but we're told that in many cases even their own families had outright disowned them.

And while it's not a perfect parallel, we have to admit that so much of what we see and hear from the world around us feels like perishing, like hopelessness, too. Sure, we here in Canada are not directly facing the same insanity and outright evil that is being perpetrated among our neighbours south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, we are not without our own constellation of challenges that seem insurmountable, unchanging, even hopeless. We wrestle with our own bouts of US-style political polarization and right-wing fanaticism, and of course, the impacts of the disruptions being created by the current US administration. Besides all that, though, there's ever-widening income inequality, seemingly intractable housing unaffordability, the scourge of the opioid addiction epidemic with all its side effects, and—of course—catastrophic climate change. In the seemingly never-ending march of these and all the other things that you yourself might add to such a list, is it possible for us to see a way beyond?

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"I thought maybe they were confused," recounted one of Gainesville State's linemen, named Alex. "They started yelling 'DEE-fense!' when *their* team had the ball. I said, 'What? Why they cheerin' for us?'" Gerald, also a Tornadoes lineman, said, "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games. ... But these people, they were yellin' *for us!* By our names!"

It's hard to know whether the folks from Faith Christian weren't at least a little scared when Gainesville State arrived... but *confused* they were not. They were simply following up on an idea that their coach had as the game approached. 'What if half of our fans—for one night only—cheered for the other team?' So Coach sent out an email asking the community to do just that. "Here's the message I want you to send," he wrote. "'You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth.'"

And so the banner was prepared, the Junior Varsity cheerleaders were drafted into service, and the fans came. And they cheered. But it didn't end even when the game was over. As the Tornadoes walked back to their bus under guard, they each were handed a bag for the ride home—a burger, some fries, a pop, some candy, a Bible, and an encouraging letter from one of Faith Christian's players. The Gainesville State coach saw Faith Christian's coach, grabbed him hard by the shoulders and said, "You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know."

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Vision is no insignificant thing. And vision *beyond* our current reality—not necessarily *at odds with* our current reality, although it could be, but more importantly, some vision *beyond* it, deeper, truer, higher, from on the other side of the veil—that sort of vision is, in many ways, priceless. That sense of not simply who we are *now*, but who we want to be, of what a hoped-for future for us could look like... such a sense can make all the difference in the world. Truly powerful, life-giving, transformative vision invites our eyes to gaze onward and upward, past merely the next step on the course we're on. It takes the core of our identity and invites us to see beyond the next horizon into the fullness of what could be, for ones such as us.

In the book we English-speakers call 'Revelation', found at the end of the New Testament and thus at the end of the whole Bible, we get let in on a vision of sorts of what the ultimate future

is, for us and for all of creation. I say a vision “*of sorts*” because Revelation doesn’t give us a pithy statement that could be put on a business card, or some goal like you might find in a city government’s long-range development plan. The vision God offers through the book of Revelation comes to us as a vision—that is, as some of you heard me mention last week, as a sort-of dreamscape, if you will... an ecstatic and exotic story full of vivid imagery and deep symbolism... a visionary landscape through which we catch a glimpse into the truth of what awaits.

Quite frankly, as I also mentioned last week, Revelation is often a misunderstood book, and therefore an often-misunderstood vision. Perhaps you’ve heard pious babbling somewhere about “rapture” and “tribulation”. Maybe you remember people who have offered up their key to what exactly each different symbol and character in Revelation supposedly stands for, or others who’ve used the book to predict an exact date for the supposed “end of the world.” All of these ways of trying to use Revelation, however, are simply at odds with the richly symbolic dreamscape the book paints. Moreover, they tend to miss the forest for the trees—that is to say, they miss the point of the vision altogether.

“What is the point, then?” you might ask. And again, as I mentioned last week, when it comes right down to it, it’s quite simple: *God wins*. That’s the point, that’s the vision. *God wins*. Over against a world where the strong devour the weak, and the rich extract more and more from the already poor, God shall in the end win. In a time when terrorists wreak havoc and far too many politicians simply reek, God shall win. In an existence marked by disease and despair, separation and desolation, pain and—yes—even death, God shall win. The God whose own Spirit-Breath fills your lungs, the God whose own image is sculpted into your face, the God who created all things and pronounced them good... that God wins. Death does not win. Hell does not win. The powers and principalities of this world do not win. God wins.

What does such a victory look like? A new heaven and a new earth altogether, the vision shows us. This is what we heard in the passage from the book of Revelation that we just read a few minutes ago, arguably the most well-known bit from the book: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” When God has won over all that would work to the contrary, the end result isn’t just a little-bit-better version of this world, a little-bit-nicer one, a little-bit-prettier or fairer one. No, it is a new creation entirely.

Death will be no more; mourning, crying, pain—no more. The wild tumults of chaos and unrest—no more. The separations among us, and the separation between us and God—no more.

Vision matters. It matters that we know where ultimate reality is heading, lest we mistakenly believe that it is headed nowhere. It matters when we know that there’s something over the next horizon that puts the struggles of today into perspective, something that makes the strivings for tomorrow having meaning.

And sure, sometimes we don’t know what to do with the fact that such visions seem so different from the way the world works right now. But perhaps that is the point. Perhaps what is so amazing, so wonderful, about the places in scripture that stand at such odds with our present reality—perhaps the reason that generations of Christians and even non-Christians have looked to such words as comfort and hope—is that they *are* such a contrasting vision. And even though I sometimes worry that these sorts of visions and sentiments are too unrealistic, too pie-in-the-sky, the truth is that we *need* a vision like this. Ultimately, the world doesn’t need us—us as Christians individually and us together collectively as the Church—the world doesn’t need us to simply be another mirroring of reality. The world needs us to hold out a hope that transcends reality.

At the end of the night, after that Texas high school football game, the players from Gainesville State were still put back in handcuffs and loaded onto their bus to be taken away. And yet, even as the reality of where life had thus far brought them came back into view, the vision they had been given, a vision that transcended their reality, still cast its light across their faces, as the players crammed to one side of the bus and pressed their hands to the window, watching as these people who they had never met before sent them off with waves and smiles. The hard work of how they might change their life journey still faced those youth in the days and months that lay ahead. But that night, they had been blessed—the blessing of gifts they had done nothing to receive, the blessing of the simple presence of people on their side, the blessing of being called by name, the blessing of glimpsing a vision of another possible reality for themselves and their lives.

And note the even greater joy of how this vision was given to those young students: it wasn't simply some disembodied tale of something that might come one day in some far off place. The new possibility of a new reality for them got delivered right into the place where they were. Just like the new creation promised in Revelation. You see, despite all the fanciful images of cosmic battles and angelic characters, at the end of the day, the culmination of all things, the news Revelation proclaims is of God coming to be with us. For Revelation, you see, heaven is not “up” somewhere, some place the lucky ones get to float away to. The new reality God creates, the new heaven and new earth, comes down to us. God comes and pitches God's own tent to take up residence with us. “See, the home of God is among mortals,” we heard the vision say. “He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”

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What will be the words that ring in *our* heads, each of us and all of us together as a people, as *we* make may through the paths of each day? What will be the vision beyond our current reality that will call us forward into hope?

Might I suggest trying on for size the word of nothing less than a new heaven and new earth... Perhaps a vision of truly no more crying or dying... a word of God-with-us, fully and completely and eternally... a vision of everyone who is thirsty being invited into the very waters of life.

And in such a word and such a vision, my friends, find hope. Moreover, find the faithfulness of God—the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our great and glorious end.