

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner
Easter V – April 24, 2016
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia

Revelation 21:1-6

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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

I want to begin this sermon by talking about budgets...we are all familiar with them, to one degree or another. I have a budget, you have one, the church has one. We present the budget to you at the Annual Meeting. The Vestry is sent the budget every month. When we think of budgets, we think of Profits and Losses, of numbers and of spreadsheets.

All of that is important. But some of us are better than others at looking at the numbers and understanding what they actually mean. That is why, in addition to the raw numbers, it is good to publish stories of what the money makes possible.

Our Generosity Team has been doing a great job of telling those stories, on the web, in announcements, with periodic mailings. I'd like to add to that this morning by celebrating your generosity with a few stories or vignettes.

Your financial gifts to this Church mean that since January of 2016 we have served over 1000 lunches on Fridays to the hungry of Richmond. That is what that budget number on the spreadsheet means.

We have received 174 requests for prescription assistance and given about \$420.00 per week to help with medications... so people with heart conditions, with diabetes, with mental health issues have been helped by you. That is the story.

Your generosity makes it possible for us to reach out to VCU and this year, one of our students was baptized.

In March, 17 adults and 8 of our campus ministry students went to Belize where they operated 5 dental chairs, undertook building projects and did eye exams for over 500 children.

Your generosity makes it possible for us to worship God, to host the Harp Ensemble today, to offer Willcock's Magnificat and to pull out all the stops on Easter Day.

Your generosity helps us care for one another and grow in Sunday School, around the Breakfast table, and in small groups. These are just a few vignettes. And it is these things that lie behind the numbers.

There is a power to stories. They stick with us in a way that numbers on a spreadsheet might not.

Stories are important. Always have been. You know the Bible has all kinds of things in it. There is a book called “Numbers” which includes a census...those enrolled in the tribe of Gad were 45,650...those enrolled in the tribe of Judah were 74,600 and so on for all 12 tribes. But we are really more interested in what happened to Judah aren’t we? Tell me that story, the story behind the numbers. And that is what the Bible does, of course. It always comes back round to stories.

In the Bible there is golden thread which runs from Genesis to Revelation. And with Jesus, who is part of that larger narrative, there are four different stories about him with the four gospels. Jesus gave commands, like the one in the gospel today: “Love one another as I have loved you.” But more often than not, when Jesus taught, Jesus told a short story, a parable...so in the gospel, we have stories within stories!

Make no mistake about it, stories are powerful because they can point us in the right direction or in the wrong direction. Where Jesus is concerned, where the faith is concerned, we can tell true stories or false ones. And those stories direct our lives.

I think there has been this narrative, an essentially false narrative, driving significant elements North American and European Christianity for a few hundred years... It goes something like this: This world is totally depraved. There is no health in it. In this scenario, you are put in this world, not to enjoy it, but to get out of it, to escape it. Your body is evil, the material world is evil, and they connive together to enslave your immortal spirit which is imprisoned inside your flesh.

The goal is to do the right thing, to believe the right thing, so that when you die, and your immortal spirit is separated from the body, it may live with God in the heavenly places. Of course, if you do the wrong things and believe the wrong things, then your immortal spirit is boiled in oil forever in hell. Regardless, the body and this world, don’t ultimately matter.

In opposition to this ...and I understand that what I've just told you picks up elements of the biblical story...but in my opinion seriously distorts them ...in opposition to this narrative of escape...is the bedrock, foundational narrative of the bible.

A narrative which talks about God's good creation...which tells the story of the Fall of humanity and of God's relentless work to bring humanity back to its true purpose. A narrative which tells the story of the People of Israel through whom God worked and from whom, in the fullness of time, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Messiah came. This biblical narrative also has an end, it looks forward in hope to the restoration of all things...restoration, not destruction.

That hope, that restoration is brilliantly portrayed on our reading today from the 21st chapter of Revelation. "Revelation is a book of profound theology, intense prophetic insight and dazzling literary accomplishment. But most modern readers find it baffling and impenetrable." ¹ Add to that a myriad of popular interpretations, like Hal Lindsay's or "The Left Behind" series...which completely misunderstand Revelation and it only gets more difficult to get at the truth.

Before I get to chapter 21 of Revelation, let me set the stage and speak what I believe to be the truth about the book. <Revelation speaks to persecuted Christians in a world where the popular imagination is controlled by the power and propaganda of Rome, which is the dominant political and economic system. Revelation envisions the same world but from God's perspective. Revelation envisions the same world, but also sees it in light of God's final purposes. In the end, God's kingdom will fill all creation.

"Revelation liberates its readers from the dominant world-view. It exposes the idolatry that from top to bottom infuses and inspires the political, economic, and social realities in which its readers live, and calls them to uncompromising Christian witness to the true God who despite earthly

¹ The Oxford Bible Commentary, copyright 2001, page 1287.

appearances is sovereign...Revelation's purpose is to enable its readers to continue to pray and to live Jesus' prayer: 'Your kingdom come.'"²

And where does that kingdom come? On earth! This is not escapist. The New Jerusalem "comes down from heaven to *earth* and...the proclamation of final salvation declares that 'the dwelling of God is with human beings,' not vice versa...(in the end) God will have redeemed and transformed the creation, not abolished it."³

This is how we must hear the words from Revelation chapter 21: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'"

That is the true story. That is how things will end. This means it is never too late! I saw this documentary recently about an aging rock star, in his late 60s, still busy drinking himself to death and he said, "Its too late for me to change. What difference would it make?" But it isn't too late! Because death is not the end of the story. There is resurrection. There is always hope. So...plant a tree on the day you die...and look for that tree on the day of resurrection!

And you know what else...your story, our story together...as we worship in this place, as we sit around the table in fellowship, as we serve others here or in Belize...as we pray and care for one another...all of those stories are wrapped up in The Story, in God's story, which leads to the renewed creation. So Amen! Alleluia! God is making all things new. Even me. Even you.

² Ibid page 1287-1288. (<Paraphrased and quoted.>)

³ The Moral Vision of the New Testament by Richard Hays, copyright 1996, page 180-181.

That is the true story. A story of renewal, engagement and hope. That is the good news for today. That is the good news forever.