

“ALL THINGS NEW”
John 13:31-35; Revelation 21:1-6
May 2, 2010
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Springtime, August 14 and February 7 (the dates when Grace and Marin were born), Easter, baptism, opening day of baseball season, whenever the garden is *finally* planted, a wedding day, the first day of school each fall: each of these is a time when I have experienced all things new. Admittedly, some are more profound than others, but all are markers of “new,” nonetheless. This week, our lectionary texts announce distinct and overlapping examples of holy renewal—ways that things are made new in God.

First, in our gospel text we hear an announcement from Jesus of a new commandment. This new commandment is “love.” One word: a word that slides easily from our mouth, yet implies far more than the time we spend uttering it. Jesus is announcing that the ancient law is now made simple: be a disciple, love one another. I hear echoes of the campfire, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love,” but I know that love is far more challenging than those lyrics portray. For love in the abstract is easy, but what about when love comes with challenges? What about when love requires us to reach out to the neighbor who abuses drugs; hug and comfort the child with explosive rage; or work things through again with the spouse or partner who burns through money, even when the budget has been discussed and planned over and over again? What about when love calls us to care for the cousin who can’t seem to stay out of prison, or befriend the co-worker who’s constant failures require extra hours of your time? What about when we look in the mirror and barely recognize ourselves because the list of our failures has nearly blotted out our ability to see ourselves as worthy of love? As Christians we sometimes refer to this passage and assume that in this new commandment things are made easier. But while this is a new law, we are kidding ourselves if we think that loving one another is somehow an easy way out. This passage announces to John’s community that the glory of God is no longer to be discovered in ritual law, but in relationship to one another. This passage yanks God’s people out of any illusion of a return to Eden, and drops us smack-dab in the muck of relationships. And it doesn’t get any uglier, any more difficult, or truthfully, any better than this. And thus Jesus installs a new commandment so that God’s people know how to be and live—together. Because that is how God envisions us.

All things are likewise made new in our text from Revelation. This passage, filled with beautiful allusion and mystery, in many ways exemplifies the difficulty the liberal Protestant church has with the book of Revelation. We don’t know how to understand the vision of things to come as told in Revelation, and so often we find ourselves dismissing this book entirely. One commentator¹, however, gave me new language that helped in my reading of this book. This commentator spoke of hearing revelation as proclamation instead of prediction. By this we are invited to read Revelation not as if it predicts an exact set of circumstances or a series of events, but instead as a book that describes the perfect and perfected life in relationship to God. Too often when we read from Revelation we are so confounded by what we read that we fall into a literal reading of

this book, even when that is not how we read any other part of the Bible. So instead of reading this as a literal “how-to” manual, what if we read it as an example of how the fullness of God’s kingdom is announced and envisioned? Then this text becomes not a threat to our faith, but a promise of relationship, care, and love—all from and with God.

Revelation offers a great deal of hope if we have the courage to look for it. Hear it again: “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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” The great promise of this passage is that “salvation is not in us going to God, but instead in God coming to us.”² The passage continues... “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with us. We will be God’s people, and God, will be with us!” The hope that is offered in this passage is that love of God is not simply something that will be experienced out there somewhere... in heaven, in the nether-reaches of the cosmos, but instead that God will dwell here, among us, in our homes, and in our day-to-day lives.

I am convinced that one of the great failures of Christianity has been its focus on attaining the afterlife instead of concentrating on how following Jesus will make a difference—in this world, in our time. As such, I find it interesting that the view proclaimed in this section of Revelation isn’t of a return to the solitude of the Garden of Eden, it isn’t even a picture of a lily-white shining palace. Instead, we are treated to the promise of a new heaven and new earth encapsulated in a city. Cities and towns are where a preponderance of the people live in contemporary times ... where commerce happens, where people work, go to school, where people build, play, walk their dogs. When we moved to Berkeley so that I could attend seminary, people spoke of San Francisco as “the city,” announcing that it was different from the suburbs and the exurbs. Things and people are often harried in cities, people don’t have much room, and yet this is the type of place that John describes as the place of new hope and renewed promise. Why is that? What is special about “the city or town?”

I think it is intentional that the Revelation of John points to city life, because entanglement and relationship are simply unavoidable in cities; and that is precisely how God envisions us living: in relationship with one another, and thus entangled in each others’ lives. So think about what that means? Do you know your neighbor? Do you know their struggles or what brings them joy? Do you know what troubles the person who sits next to you in the pew, or do you know what is giving them sustenance today? In the Revelation to John there is an explicit call to the city, to the entangled life that forces us to live beyond ourselves in the city with God’s people.

So this morning I want to offer all of you a special welcome to the place where all things are made new... to God’s holy city. Some of us bring fear and doubt, some come with disease or anger, pain and sorrow, and yet there is so much more here also. In God’s holy city there is also hope, passion, promise, love, fidelity, compassion, courage, and creative energy! It is all here, and it is all Holy! The promise authored in the resurrection is the promise that God has not been taken from us, but instead that God continues to grow among us. We hold the blueprint for God’s holy city; our stewardship and our love

are the only things needed to make all things new—today and forever more! God’s beloved children...welcome to this Holy place! Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹Frerichs, Wendell W., *God’s Song of Revelation: From Easter to Pentecost in the Apocalypse*, Word & World 6/2 (1986), pages 217- 228.

http://www2.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/6-2_Way/6-2_Frerichs.pdf, accessed on April 27, 2010.

² Peterson, Brian, *Lectionary for May 2, 2010*, workingpreacher.org.

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lectdate=5/2/2010>, accessed April 27, 2010.