

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, November 1, 2015

Everything New Under the Son

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

November 1, 2015

All Saints' Day

Revelation 21:1-6

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the most unusual book of the Bible, a book which most pastors, including me, tend to avoid in sermons because it is apocalyptic, highly symbolic and hard to understand. I am of course referring to the book of Revelation. It is also called the Revelation of John or the Revelation to John. I prefer the latter title because it more closely says what the book is --- a revelation which was given to John, whoever this John was.

We know that someone named John wrote the book because he identifies himself several times in it. We also know that he wrote it while he was a prisoner of the Romans on the island of Patmos. That much we know for sure. But which John was the John of Patmos? The Apostle John? Perhaps, but the writing style differs sharply from the Gospel of John suggesting that another John wrote the book. Theologians disagree on the authorship but most think it was the Apostle John.

If it was the Apostle John, why is the writing style so different? The most likely reason is that the apocalyptic style of the writing would have been meaningless to John's Roman captors on Patmos but the writing itself and its meaning would have been very clear to the early Christians. Today it is confusing and obscure to many of us but it would not have been to the Christians of the first century.

The revelation the book is about is believed to be a revelation to John from Jesus about what to expect at the time of the Parousia, the second coming of Christ.

Of all of Revelation, today's reading is probably the most familiar part to us if for no other reason that that we all have heard it many times, most often during funeral services.

We think of heaven to be somewhere above us, somewhere up in the sky, somewhere in the vast universe. Jesus ascended to heaven and numerous places in scripture refer to persons ascending to heaven or the voice of God coming down from

heaven. So we think of heaven being “up there” someplace.

We live “down here” in a world of suffering --- a place where wars, disease, terror attacks, poverty and hatred abound all too frequently. We long for a rebirth --- an end to all of the problems of this earth. We await the time when we will go “up there” and get away from all of earth’s cares and concerns.

Did you ever desire to make your life new --- to get a new house in a new neighborhood, a new car and new furniture, a new job, new friends, perhaps a new church? I am sure that at times all of us have wanted something new. But what is new? We read, “There is nothing new under the sun” and that is basically true now. We can perhaps get “new” things but they really won’t be new, at least not for long. The problems of the world will still be there. That new car will quickly depreciate. The new furniture will soon show signs of wear. We will start to grumble about things that bother us about the new job and the new church. The new house too will not be new for long and we will long for our old friends and our old neighborhood. Yes, there is nothing new under the sun, at least not now but our scripture reading does promise us everything new under the son, Jesus the Christ, and it won’t be “up there” in heaven. We are promised that heaven will be “down here”, heaven will be on earth.

I like a story that was told by Rev. Melvin Newland, a pastor in Brownsville, Texas when he was preaching on this same passage from Revelation.

He told of a wealthy Christian who was obsessed with taking his wealth with him to heaven. He was so obsessed that he prayed day and night to God for permission to take his wealth with him.

Finally God responded saying, “OK. Enough all ready! You can take one suitcase with you, nothing more.”

The man thought and thought about what to put in that suitcase. He finally decided, filled a large suitcase, and set it aside for the day of his death.

Eventually he died and very slowly approached the pearly gates dragging this incredibly heavy suitcase behind him.

St. Peter stopped him and said, “Hold it! You are not allowed to take anything into heaven.” The man answered, “I have special permission from God Himself to take this suitcase into heaven.”

Peter rubbed his beard and said, “That’s very unusual. I can’t imagine God letting

you do that. Let me look inside your suitcase and see what is in there.”

The man struggled to drag the suitcase over and lift it up onto a table so that St. Peter could open it. The suitcase was so heavy that the legs on the table began to bend and crack, but they held.

Peter opened the suitcase and saw that it was filled with gold bricks.

St. Peter shrugged and said, “Well, all right. If God said so, I suppose you can take them in if you want. But why in the world did you go to all this trouble just to bring more paving bricks into heaven?”

The point is that what we may consider to be valuable, what we may want to keep of our material possessions, won't be worth anything “up there.”

John of Patmos tells us why. Heaven and earth as we envision them today will be no more --- a new heaven and a new earth will be “down here.”

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God 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 ...’”

Everything will be new under the son --- everything!

We won't be floating around on clouds playing harps or singing in an eternal choir. Heaven will be a place of righteousness, a place with meaningful rewards, a place of reunion with those who have gone before us, and, most important, it will be God's residence. Everything will be new and, unlike what we have now, it won't wear out or depreciate.

Rev. Newland told another story about a Sunday School teacher who asked her class of children, “What do you think heaven will be like.”

A third grader answered, “It is going to be the happiest part of my dead life.”

And indeed it will be. It will be everything new under the Son.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011