

Revelation 21:1-6, 22:1-7 (NRSV)

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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And 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;

⁴he 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.”

⁵And 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.” ⁶Then 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.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

⁶And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

⁷“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

If we are to cast a vision for the future of St. Andrew, we must first celebrate John's vision of the glorious fulfillment of God's purposes.

Much lies between last week's reading from Revelation and this week's, i.e., from the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb and his bride, to the “new heaven and new earth” of chapter 21. Jesus rides out on a white horse to lead God's army in the defeat of Satan's minions and the imprisonment of Satan himself, ushering in a time of Jesus' reign. After Satan's parole(?)¹, he resumes his opposition to God and must be defeated a second time. Next comes the scene of the great judgment and the reading from the book of life. Finally, we arrive at the scenes to which all of Scripture has been leading us: the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth, the tree of life . . . and the Alpha and Omega.

Looking back so we can look ahead

It's easy to get lost in the expanse of the Bible. 66 books. 1,189 chapters. 31,102 verses². Written, compiled, and edited over many centuries. Millennia ago. Yet, there is an over-

¹In a surprising turn of events, after Satan is imprisoned(19:17-21), he is later released – paroled, I guess – only to be defeated one last time. Why is he released at all in the vision? Could it be that God yet hopes for even Satan's repentance? After all that has happened, could God be extending a second chance? Similarly, in the book of Job, God makes a wager with Satan that will result in harm befalling Job. Why does God make such a wager? Could it be that God hopes Job's faithfulness will cause Satan to repent? And what would all this say to us about the nature of the God whom we worship? We'd all benefit from spending less time indulging ourselves in the fantastical imagery of Revelation and more time in striving to hear God's message.

²No need to e-mail me if you have a different number. It all depends on which translation is used, the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts, and who is doing the counting. It is helpful to remember that the original texts had no chapter and verse divisions; these were added much later.

arching narrative to this vast library. It is the story of God putting right what went wrong almost from the beginning. God created the cosmos, pronounced it good, and made

A Vision for St. Andrew

Casting a vision for a church, as for any organization or individual, is a bit like using a GPS navigation system in a car. Most of time we ride around zoomed in on the map so we can find the right street. But sometimes, we need to zoom out so we can see where we are really headed and to make sure it is in the right direction.

If we zoom all the way out from our day to day lives, we can see, as depicted in the closing chapters of Revelation, that we are headed for the restoration of all God's creation, for a time when God's reign, the kingdom of God, is embraced in every corner of the globe, a time when the marriage of heaven and earth is fully consummated.

If we at St. Andrew begin then to zoom in again, looking to see where we should be headed in the next 20 years, 10 years, five years, even 2008 . . . we still have to remember that God has larger purposes at work. As we await the final merger of heaven and earth, what can we do, now and ten years from now, to build for the kingdom of God? What can we do to help renew creation and to restore relationship?

First, are we helping those who are already part of this fellowship to experience the joy of an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus Christ and one another?

Secondly, are we helping to bring others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ? As Paul writes,

"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:14-15).

And finally, the third leg in this three-legged stool, are we providing homes for the homeless, food for the hungry, healing for the sick?

As we seek to live out God's vision, our own vision must be far-sighted and clear-headed. It must dare us to demand more from ourselves, to be generous and resolute, to remain faithful to God in *all* things. It is a challenge we must embrace.

humans in his image. He gave them a beautiful place to live and work. Yet, tragically, they tossed it all away for the chance to be like gods themselves. So God set about to put things right. God chose a people, Abraham and his descendents, through whom this restoration would proceed. In the end, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, would have to do for Israel and all humanity what they were and we still are unable to do for ourselves – simply to love God and to love neighbor.

The renewal of creation and the restoration of loving relationship is what it has always been about. They are the final fulfillment of promises God made through his many prophets. Hence, the closing visions of Revelation are like a stained glass window in which each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The "new heaven and new earth" is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises "a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life" (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life. Whereas Moses couldn't see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20), we are told that God's servants will see God's face (Rev. 22:4).

All will be well

It is so easy to be caught up in the troubles and terrors of our lives and our world. Too often, we are overwhelmed by our anxieties and fears. Yet, these apocalyptic visions of a day with no death or tears or pain are God's promises that all will be well. John Ortberg wrote recently of our hunger for joy, rightful hunger because joy lies at the core of the cosmos. The closing visions of Revelation are one big fountain of joy. We may not always know that all will be well, but God knows it. Ortberg quotes a Christian who lived long ago, Julian of Norwich:

"All will be well,
And all will be well,
And all manner of things will be well."

The "End" is not an event but a "Who." There is no need for a temple in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 because the temple is the Lord God and the Lamb (v. 22). There is no need for a sun or the light of a lamp because the Lord God will be our light (22:5). It is the Lamb who is the "Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:12).

Maranatha . . . Come, Lord Jesus, Come (Revelation 22:20)

Living Revelation

In his *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Revelation, Christopher Rowland reflects on Revelation's claims to authority and the challenge of living with John's apocalyptic visions:

"We are left in no doubt about the importance John attached to his book [see the blessings of 1:3 and the warnings of 22:18-19]. It is ironic that the book in the New Testament with the most exalted claim to authority is the one that is least read and most widely despised. Even if we cannot understand its message in its entirety and are uncomfortable with the import of what we can understand, we must not ignore it. It stands not only at the end of the New Testament, but at the end of the Christian Bible. Thus it may offer us a key to understanding the whole story, because it points to the fulfillment of God's purposes, of which all else gives only a partial and fragmentary example. Its message is about God and about human history. Its scope is panoramic, and its focus on Jesus as the key to understanding the fulfillment of God's justice is central. Revelation may enable us to look back over the biblical story and make sense of the whole as well as pointedly reminding us of the demands made on us by a God who regards every action as significant. We may begin to glimpse what the Spirit says to the churches and learn to respond accordingly: 'Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates' (22:14 NRSV; cf. 7:14)."

"Revelation is intended to be heard and read. Keeping the words is not about defensiveness or preservation, nor is it simply a matter of intellectual understanding confined to academy or church. Keeping the words means practicing their message in life. It is a matter of being so utterly informed and pervaded by the words that one can perceive that 'the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.' John had to devour the book, and there is a sense in which the reader and the hearer must do that with Revelation—digest it so that one also can 'prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.' Thus the effect of reading the text is to condition an outlook on life whereby image and metaphor jar us awake and transform our actions as well as our attitudes. The temptation is to ask what this book is about and to seek references in history—past, present, or future. But first and foremost, Revelation is meant to be heard and to be read, so that the reader/listener is changed; that change means repentance and rebirth (cf. Matt 19:28)."

READING WITH HEART & MIND, OCT 7 - 13

Sunday, 1 Samuel 1 In the coming weeks, we'll be reading portions of the book of Samuel. What seems familiar about this story of the birth of a boy named Samuel? What do you think is the theological point of this birth story?

Monday, 1 Samuel 2:11-36 The tabernacle of God was kept at Shiloh, located roughly in the middle of Canaan, until the temple was built in Jerusalem. Eli and his sons are the chief priests of the tabernacle. Thus, the corruption of Eli's sons is a big deal and Samuel's divine favor (v. 26) stands in stark contrast.

Tuesday, 1 Samuel 3: 1 – 4:1a The wonderful story of Samuel's call. Why do you think the word of the Lord was rare in Israel at the time (3:1)? What is revealed here about Samuel? About Eli?

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 5 After winning the Ark of the Covenant in battle, the Philistines come to regret their victory. What does this story reveal about God? Why do you think so much time is spent on this story?

Thursday, 1 Samuel 7:3-17 Samuel is now not only a priest and prophet, but also a military commander and judge.

Friday, 1 Samuel 8 The people come to Samuel to demand that they be given a king like everyone else has. What is Samuel's reply? What does he warn them about? Why have the people rejected God as their king? Does God give them what they want?

Saturday, 1 Samuel 9 A man named Saul is identified as the first king. He certainly looks the part. And he's rich! Saul is God's choice, yet he will prove himself to be disobedient as his life unravels. What might this say to us about being God's "chosen?"

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is now meeting in Festival Hall at 11am. We hope that you'll join us!

Because Scott is now preaching in the 9:30 service each week, his Sunday class has moved to 11am in Festival Hall. It is open to adults of all ages and focuses on a deeper understanding of Scripture. We have more time to deal with the Scripture passage and topic for the week. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com.

Hold the date!! Kim Edwards on October 25 at 7pm

Kim Edwards, author of the huge international bestseller, *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, will be at St. Andrew as part of our new St. Andrew Author Series. Her most recent book has been on the NY Times bestseller list for 65 weeks!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

God has cast a mighty big vision at the end of Revelation. No death, no tears, no pain. A world remade. Take a few minutes and read through Revelation 21 and 22 in their entirety. What do you find most striking? What hope can you find here for yourself?

Surely, we are supposed to grasp that "all will be well." But grasping it and really living such confident hope are not the same thing. How can we find the joy – at all times and in all things? In writing about our hunger for joy, Ortberg quotes G.K. Chesterton at length, who closed his book, *Orthodoxy*, suggesting that for all Jesus showed the world, there was something that he concealed: "There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied it was His mirth." His mirth?! What do you think he means? Perhaps Chesterton sees that in the midst of all our troubles and fears, God knows that it all ends well and can't help but lovingly chuckle at our needless anxieties even as he consoles us. That may seem a bit of an odd image to you, but it comforts me. God is like the loving parent who knows his child will be all right, even if the child doesn't – and finds great joy in the knowing.

Finally, how can these last chapters of Revelation inform the direction we take at St. Andrew. Today is devoted to the vision of St. Andrew, who we'll strive to be in a year, five years, ten years. How can God's vision of the new heaven and earth guide us as we seek to clarify and implement our own vision? Are we to just wait around for God to do his thing? How can we best live up to the challenge of hearing and keeping "the words of the book of this prophecy" (see 1:3 and 22:18-19) as St. Andrew moves forward?