

“What God Needs are Saints”

Based on Rev. 21:1-6

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I have presided over a lot of funerals in my 24 years of ministry. In probably every one of those funerals we have prayed together Psalm 23. It is a psalm that names the reality of death but also the promise of eternal life. “Yay, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me... Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.” This psalm gives us a word of comfort, of promise, of hope, that for our dearly departed, the final chapter of their life has not yet been written. They have gone ahead of us, to dwell with God. And one day we will join them on the other side of the veil.

Another scripture that I have used almost as much is the passage we heard today. It is John’s vision of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven and resting on the earth, an event that signals how God is making all things new, a new heaven and a new earth, where weeping, sorrow, pain, even death itself, will be vanquished. It is a powerful vision filled with hope and promise for us of our destiny, even the destiny of the whole world. Let’s take some time this morning to look more closely at this vision John received.

It begins with John saying he saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. By saying he saw a new heaven and a new earth meant that he saw something that was different, something that had not existed before. But it was not completely new. There was continuity with what had been. The first heaven and first earth had passed away, but there still existed a heaven and earth. They were not replaced with something completely new. This is something to keep in mind. In this vision, John is seeing continuity and change. There is still a heaven and earth, but it is different, changed, transformed, new. It is sort of like when a person receives a new name, which marks a transformation in their life. Saul changed his name to

Paul. Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter. In the Orthodox church tradition, at baptism you receive a baptismal name. When people become monks or nuns they receive a new name. When someone is elected pope he selects a new name. Among indigenous peoples, young people will go on a vision quest as a rite of passage, in order to receive a new name. People who transition from one gender to another will take a new name. I took on a new name when I went through college, as I committed my life to being a pastor. My friends started calling me "Kev the Rev." We get new names as we go through life: Tina Jones becomes Mrs. Tina Jones-Baldwin, then Dr. Tina Jones-Baldwin. Her kids call her "mom." One day she will be called Grandma, maybe even Great-Grandma. You and I remain human our whole life. But we go through changes. We experience transformations. We are not the same when we are old as we were when we were young. Our names and titles change as we go through these times of transformation. And that's what John is talking about here. He was allowed to see a transformed heaven and a transformed earth. Still heaven and earth, but different, transformed, new.

Then he saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. In those days, the people believed that the holy city of Jerusalem on earth mirrored the holy city of Jerusalem in heaven. God's throne was in the heavenly city but God's footstool was in the holy city on earth, in the Temple, the holy of holies, which was the center of the earth. Remember, in those days, it was believed that the earth was flat. Jerusalem occupied the center of the earth, so the people believed. Of course, the holy city on earth had been destroyed more than once. And, in fact, when John had this vision, the Temple in Jerusalem had not only been destroyed, the city had been renamed, literally wiped off the map. As you can imagine, it was a time of great crisis. How would God restore the holy city? Well, John got his answer. The holy city in heaven would come down to earth. This would be the new Jerusalem. It would not be rebuilt only to be destroyed again. No, the heavenly city itself, where God's throne was, where God *lived*, would come down to earth. There would be no replacement Temple because God himself will dwell with them.

I cannot overstate how awesome this vision is. What John saw was the removal of the veil between heaven and earth. Right now, when we die, we have the hope that we will pass through the veil to the other side, where we will join our loved ones in heaven. Or sometimes we talk about crossing the chilly river Jordan to the other side. There is a barrier between heaven and earth. We look forward to going to heaven but we can't see heaven. It is hidden from us. Just like we can't see God. We know God is present but we can't see God. There is a veil, a barrier, a wall between heaven and earth.

But John saw that barrier removed. But it wasn't God bringing earth up to heaven. No, heaven came down to earth. John heard the voice from heaven saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them. God will be with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes." This is John's vision. Instead of us going to God when we die, God will remove the wall of division, and come down to us. And that is the essence of what it means to have a new heaven and a new earth. Everything will be new because heaven and earth will become one, with no division, no wall, no barrier. In this vision, earth is not destroyed. It is transformed, it is made holy and pure. It is literally heaven on earth.

What are the consequences of heaven on earth? "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." That is, the first things of a barrier between heaven and earth. The first things in which for us to get to heaven, we have to die first. If heaven is on earth, there is no need for death. The wall is torn down. The gates are open wide. Death, and the grief that comes with it, is vanquished. Death has no place in heaven. Even more, death, sorrow, suffering, are all temporary states. They are not permanent. The only thing that is permanent, eternal, everlasting, is life. Because God is the source of life and God is everlasting. Death is temporary, life is everlasting. And this truth will be fully manifest one day. That's the vision that John has received. And for us, it is a vision filled with hope.

Of course, John's vision was prefigured in a person. Jesus is the very incarnation of John's vision. In Jesus, God came down to earth and dwelled with us. Jesus wept, suffered, was full of sorrow, and died. He

experienced these things that we must all experience. But then Jesus rose from the dead, defeating the power of death, demonstrating that death is temporary, life is everlasting. But then Jesus had to go back up to heaven. He ascended in a cloud and his disciples could see him no more. The barrier between heaven and earth remained. We know Jesus. We know Jesus lives in our hearts. But we can't see Jesus face to face. We can't physically embrace Jesus and look into his eyes. Not yet. One day we will when we pass through the veil. Yet, the day will come, when what was ushered in by Jesus will become fully manifest, when the veil is torn in two, and God comes down to dwell on earth. All things made new.

This vision that John has received of what will happen in the future is a vision that fills us with wonder. It is a hopeful vision. Rather than the earth being destroyed, this vision promises that the earth will be transformed. The Paradise of Eden will come back. Except it won't be a garden, it will be a city. It is a vision that insists that death and sorrow and pain are not a permanent reality. The only thing that is permanent is life. This gives us hope. This gives us the strength to push through our times of suffering. As Paul once said, these momentary sufferings are nothing in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ our savior and his resurrection. This is a life-giving vision for us. It provides comfort as we grieve the loss of those we love and as we contemplate our own death.

But I want to give a warning. There is a temptation, as the old phrase goes, to be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good. There is a temptation, if we dwell on this vision, to slip into pie-in-the-sky, things will be better by and by thinking. There is a temptation to look on the mess of this world, the brokenness, the violence, the ugliness, the evil run rampant in our world, and to close ourselves in with our vision of God coming down and making everything new. So we need to just do our best, love Jesus, and wait for our turn to experience that camp meeting standard, "Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away, to that home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away. When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away." I love that song! It lifts our spirits and helps us cope with the reality of death.

But what about this world? Are we supposed to just shrug our shoulders when we look at how messed up this world is and say to ourselves, “It’s God’s problem. God’s going to have to fix this mess. I know where I’m going when I die. Good luck for everyone else.” Here’s the problem with pie-in-the-sky thinking. The first commandment God gave us was to be stewards of the earth. But we also know the two greatest commandments, which are to love God and to love our neighbor as our self. And who is our neighbor? Jesus taught us that everyone is our neighbor. Jesus made it personal. He said that when you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick or in prison, whatever you do for the least of these, the marginalized, the discarded, the overlooked, you are doing it to Jesus. Far from pie-in-the-sky, we’ll get to heaven by and by thinking, we are called to deep compassion and care for this earth and for every creature, human and non-human on it. It is a dereliction of our responsibility to have an “I’ll Fly Away” mindset when we have work to do right now. Paul said that as ambassadors of Jesus we all have received the ministry of reconciliation. In a time when the political divides have not been this stark since the 1960s, our ministry of reconciliation, to bridge differences, to find common ground, to heal the wounds...if we don’t do this work, who will?

But it’s not just that we have this responsibility. I want to remind you that, although it is possible for God to act unilaterally, the truth is that God gets God’s work done through people. When we do good, it is God working through us. We are the hands and feet of Christ. God is always at work, seeking to bring about healing, good, restoration, renewal, *through us*. When we fail, and we often do fail, to allow God to work through us, we frustrate God’s work. I say all this to ask a question: is it possible that the vision John received, of God coming down to earth, removing the barrier between heaven and earth, will that vision only become manifest through our co-operation with God? What if God’s plan to make all things new will get worked out through us and those who will come after us?

I wonder if the destiny of humanity is to be used by God to usher in God’s reign on earth. I wonder if our common task as human beings is to resist the forces of death and destruction and evil and instead to make

every effort to foster life, redemption, transformation. Not just our own transformation but the transformation of others, of communities, of our state, our nation, our world. I wonder if God's desire is to remove all barriers between God and the world, to merge heaven and earth, and all God needs is people who will yield to the Spirit of God and be the instruments by which God yokes heaven and earth together. What God needs are saints. What God needs is for each of us, who have received the Spirit, to be who we are, the saints of God.