

October 7, 2018 • World Communion Sunday • Presentation of 4th Grade Bibles

“New Heaven/New Earth”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



Revelation 21:1-5

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, 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.”

I love this day on which we present Bibles to our fourth-graders each year. As their church family, we pray that this is a gift that will further them along a life-long path of reading and studying the Bible and that they will dive deep into the life-giving Word of God. Maybe they’ll even read all the way to the very last book of the Bible, the wildly poetic and imaginative Book of Revelation.

The verses we hear this morning on World Communion Sunday are found in a passage describing how things will be in the fullness of time, the new heaven and new earth that God is creating in Christ Jesus. It’s a compelling and comforting vision, full of joy and promise and hope. It points us to the future, God’s future for us, and gives us a glimpse of what God has in store for us—a future created by God, for us. It’s not scary, horrific end time as some would have us believe, but a beautiful culmination of God’s design for humankind.

What is this future to be like? Just these few verses let us know that God’s future for us means that God will never give up on us or abandon us, that God is creating something new for us where God will be at home with us, where we will experience all the excitement and joy of a wedding, where all tears will be wiped away and pain and sorrow and death will be no more. What a beautiful future! What a wonderful word of assurance and promise to hear on this morning.

There’s a very important aspect about this future that God is putting together for us that we really need to pay attention to on this World Communion Sunday morning, something about the future that may prove to be a bit challenging for us. It’s found in verse three, printed on the front of the Order of Worship this morning. It jumped out at me when I re-read this passage in preparation for this day. “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples.” Not “his people” but rather “his peoples”, plural. Peoples. And that “s” on the end of that word, that “s” that makes “people” into the plural “peoples” is very intriguing—and very challenging.

Because usually, when we think about heaven, when we think about the new heaven and the new earth, when we think about world communion, we imagine a kind of unity in which God makes us all one. We stress our commonality as children of God. We emphasize all those things that make us alike in our worship of God. One bread, one body. We celebrate that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free. We rejoice that on World Communion Sunday no matter where or how we’re worshipping God, we are united in this sacrament of Holy Communion. All of that is true. Thanks be to God!

But, that one little “s” in verse 3 adds an even more powerful dimension to this celebration. It reminds us that unity is not about ultimate sameness. The vision into which we live in God is not about giving up our distinctive cultures and languages and histories and identities. It’s not about becoming something that we’re not in order to be part of God’s great future. It’s not about becoming some sort of generic mush of cloned believers who have been air-brushed and sugar-coated and made all alike.

No! That “s” in verse three proclaims that in the fullness of time, in the completion of creation, in the everlasting tear-free joy of God’s future, we will still be among God’s peoples, all special, all unique, all essential to the holy plan. So that in the end, our diversity will still be a hallmark of God’s plan, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

This fact about what God intends for the future holds powerful and profound implications for the present. It calls us to honor and value our very diversity. It calls to embrace the very things that can set us apart—language, culture, difference. It shows us that these differences are not things to be overcome or to be avoided, but are to be embraced.

The creation of God from the beginning is a creation of an astonishing diversity of life forms and peoples. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written in his important book, *The Dignity of Difference*: “...the one God, creator of diversity,

commands us to honor his creation by respecting diversity....the test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his."

Part of the very beauty and power of this World Communion Sunday is way in which it lifts up our God-given diversity as well as our God-given unity.

Diversity in unity. God's peoples—distinct, diverse, different. United in love and service. What a gift this is to our broken and fearful world on World Communion Sunday, 2018, a world in which differences divide us, and cause us to fear and even hate one another, a broken world, devouring itself in violence among tribes and nations and regions and political parties and even religions. Our global worship this day witnesses to the world that as God's many peoples, we commit to know and respect one another, to create partnerships of service and mission just as we're doing here in this congregation, to build bridges of interaction and understanding, binding together what must not be divided or diminished or destroyed.

Listen to a contemporary translation of verses from another place in Revelation describing this new City of God, God's new creation:

"This is the story of the beautiful city of God. This city sparkles with the loveliest of rare gems. The city is filled with light. There are no shrines or temples because everything here is understood to be sacred and filled with the holy. This is the story of the beloved community. In this community we [all] find welcome. In this community we find kinship...In this community we are all loved."

May God bless our worship this day and infuse us with a spirit of rejoicing as from all around the world we come to this table — all peoples together. God's beautiful, diverse peoples, glorious in our diversity and united in our Lord--loved, welcomed, cherished forever in the great, great peace and love of God.

AMEN.

Notes:

Jonathan Sacks. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. New York: Continuum, 2003.

Translation from Gregory Boyle's *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

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