

## **A New Thing**

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**Revelation 21:1-6**

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Change makes you do crazy things. In my possession I have a small badge that one of my children received more than a decade ago when we visited a historic castle when we lived in Scotland. I don't know why I kept it, but somehow I unearthed it in our move to New Orleans and when our lives were being boxed up and in a general state of upheaval, I vowed to myself that I was not going to lose track of that little historic badge from a Scottish castle. It almost became a personal quest to make sure that little trinket made it from our home to our temporary residence to our current home. At some point in the process, I even asked myself, why are you doing this, why is this so important to you, why have you attached some really deep emotions to this dime-a-dozen token. I don't have a good answer other than that badge had somehow made it from that Scottish castle, back across the ocean to our home for 8 years, it made it in a big move here, and it represented some sense of continuity in our lives when everything else was up in the air and in flux, and by God, I was determined to make sure it continued to accompany us in our lives in the midst of change and disruption in our lives. I am not defending it or claiming it was completely rational and sound, I am just trying to explain how that silly little badge came to represent something important to me in the midst of change.

In the very first line of our scripture lesson, we hear John's vision of a new heaven and new earth and that Christ's coming kingdom will come as a disruption and transformation of our world rather than simply being an easy continuity and seamless transition. That the coming Christ will make all things new does not always come as comfort to those who prefer a little tweaking here or prefer to try to manage and control their change. The saying may be that 'hell is other people,' but the future reality and change Revelation points us is not a community-less future where we are all individually gratified and fulfilled at a separate divine charging station apart from the presence of other people and relationships and people in our lives, rather the temple of the Lord makes his home among us. And Revelation shows us what the future looks like...that one day we will shine all day and night in the presence of the Lord God, but for now we look to God to make us shine, to make us radiant from moment to moment in the community in which we have been placed.

In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson's fictional preacher, the congregationalist minister John Ames writes an extended letter to his son, written from the perspective of several generations of ministers and their progeny. Reflecting on his on his own life and the life of faith, the Reverend Ames says that it seems, every now and then, that "the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or year of the span of life...but the Lord is (even) more constant and far more extravagant

than (even that) seems to imply.”<sup>1</sup> That is what Revelation tells us God is in the process of doing...enabling the gray embers of our lives to turn to radiance and shine more vibrantly and beautifully than we could ever envision for ourselves, until Christ’s kingdom comes. Sometimes our radiance can still shine long after we ourselves are gone. I know many of our youth are in the midst of confirmation class right now and later this year will present their own statements of faith to our church session. Several years ago, a session member shared with me a letter that was written to him at his confirmation by his elder sponsor. The letter were words of encouragement and support at a time in his own life of faith when he was a confirmand trying to stand on his own two feet and make sense of the life of faith. He kept the letter but the elder who wrote it to him left this earth long ago, yet weirdly and miraculously lives as these words still shine with the radiance of Christ...here is what he wrote to a young person just beginning in their life of faith: “...don’t speed...thirty-six in a 25 mph zone will earn you a \$90 fine but I really mean you ought to savor the moments. Appreciate where you are, who you’re with. Plans are good but enjoy the trip. Pray. Read your Bible. Stick with it. Some days it may be more motion than emotion, but stick with it. Relish God’s handiwork. Be humbled by your smallness. God is constant. Life isn’t.” We may be small gray embers of God’s creation, but God seeks to make us shine with the radiance of Christ, far more deeply and brightly and lengthily than we could ever ask or imagine or conceive.

Our passage also reminds us that God so loves *this* world, not some other world, and that the holy city, the new heaven and new earth comes down here and dwells among us. In my office hangs a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that says “God turns toward the very places that humans tend to turn away.” But our passage from Revelation says even more and goes one step further...not only does God turn toward the very places we try to escape, but that God enters into the very places we tend to turn away from, and that the home of God is not some perfect realm far away, but the “home of God is among mortals.’ ‘He will dwell with them,’ Revelation promises us, ‘and they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them.’ (Revelation 21:2-3). The biblical heaven, Eugene Peterson reminds us, ‘is not a nice environment far removed from the stress’ of this world, it is not a ‘long eternal weekend away from the responsibilities’ of this world, it is the *invasion* of our world by the presence of God, it is the intensification and healing and transformation of *this* world...where miraculously God comes into our world and forms heaven out of the ‘dirty streets and murderous alleys, the hypocritical synagogues and the commercialized churches’ made up of all kinds of broken people and hypocrites ‘tax-collectors and traitorous disciples,’ people who cannot completely escape their past but

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 245.

who are nevertheless the very people God chooses to dwell with, the very people God chooses to use, and the very people God will transform.<sup>2</sup>

The new heaven and new earth is not a human achievement or level of spirituality we are supposed to ascend to and reach, but “an invasion of God’s rule and presence downwards.”<sup>3</sup> The message of Revelation is the message of Christmas and the message of Genesis and the message of God’s life with Israel: that the home of God is among mortals and God will dwell with us, find a way to us, make us his people by transforming this world, this place, this material existence. Will Willimon cautions us that we are not naturally inclined to like the way God chooses to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. “Tell me I have some charismatic flair for leadership. [Let me] become a spiritual virtuoso, but please do not force me to find what I do and therefore who I am among those who gather at my so very mundane congregation. Allow me to have some exotic spiritual experience that makes my holy, give me a degree and tell me I am special,’ but do not do a new thing with me through the ordinary life of the people who sit next to me in the pews.<sup>4</sup> I want to transcend to a special spiritual place with God but all God seems to want to do is to make a home in this world, to sanctify and shape us and enable each one of us to flourish in the place God has placed us. Isn’t it interesting that throughout scripture and dare I say our own lives, humanity, us, you, me, we, long for a better world, a different world, a more divine and spiritual world, we long for our own deification, we long to commune with the divine, to transcend our ordinary lives and our uninteresting world, and yet whenever we open scripture and really pay attention to it, account after account depict for us a who God longs for and enters this world, these lives, a God becomes truly human, not so that we can escape and reach a level of spiritual deification, but so that we can become truly human and flourish in this world, catching glimpses of the new heaven and new earth that will one day complete us. While we are dreaming about our self-deification, while we are longing to be like God, God chooses to become one of us, to make his home with us. We long for God up there, out there, way over there, but God comes too close for comfort and freely approaches us in the face of our neighbor and stranger and even our enemies.

Again in her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson’s fictional preacher and congregationalist minister John Ames writes to his son and says that we can’t spend our lives wasting time and searching for proof of God’s existence...as if that is the quest of faith...”my advice,” Reverend Ames tells us, “is this---don’t look for proofs. Don’t bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to (fully answer) the question, and they’re

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, 174.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, 185.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Willimon, “The Spiritual Formation of the Pastor,” from *The Pastor’s Guide to Personal Spiritual Formation*, 25.

always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp.”<sup>5</sup> They claim for God a place within our grasp. As Revelation shows us over and over again...God comes down to dwell among us, God overtakes us, God sneaks up on us, God find a way to us, God shines through us and transfigures us, in circumstances we do not get to choose, through people we would prefer to set aside, in situations we think are ours to manage. A faithful sermon, Will Willimon reminds us, does not necessarily lead us to ‘a warm feeling of peace,’ but rather a occurs when we are able to hear the truth about God and about ourselves from someone who is suspiciously a lot like us, without killing them for saying it.<sup>6</sup> That is the miracle. To look for God in the mess of our lives and the mess of the church, to see that the home of God is among mortals, to see those who sit right next to us, as the dwelling places of God, is the way we begin to see the new heaven and new earth coming into being in this world, it’s the transformation of the place in which God has placed us...a new thing...nowhere else but right in front of us. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon, “Preaching: Acting Up with the Holy Spirit,” *Journal for Preachers*, 3.