

Trinity United Methodist Church

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Scripture: Revelation 21:1-7 (NIV)

1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** 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 himself will be with them and be their God. **4** ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” **5** He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” **6** 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 without cost from the spring of the water of life. **7** Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

The story is of two men who died and went to heaven, and there they met St. Peter at the pearly gates. And he told the two men, “You can do just about anything you want here in heaven, but please do not step on a duck, because they make a terrible noise and racket.” And so the two men agreed and entered on into heaven. And one day, one of the men accidentally stepped on a duck. And indeed, it made this terrible noise and racket, such that soon St. Peter was upon them. And he came over to the man with one of the ugliest women in heaven. And he immediately chained the woman to the man, and the man sadly walked away with the ugly woman.

The other man was shocked, so he took extra precautions not to step on a duck. And after much time of success, St. Peter came over to him with one of the most beautiful women in heaven, just absolutely beautiful, and chained the woman to him.

The man was all kinds of excited and said to the woman, “I’m not sure what I did to get chained to you, but this is great!” And the beautiful woman looked at him and said, “I don’t know. All I did was step on a duck.”

I told that story *the other way* at 9:30 and people didn’t laugh nearly as much, so I switched it up.

There are so many jokes about heaven, so many stories about heaven. Indeed, so many jokes that I could not tell in church about heaven. But think about this: What comes to your mind when you think of heaven? Is it the pearly gates? A city in the clouds, streets of gold? Well, you would be fairly biblically accurate there. But what about other popular concepts of heaven? Do we get angel wings when we get there? Will we be reunited with friends and loved ones? Will we be floating around on our own personal cloud, playing harps, in some disembodied state after death? Well, these descriptions would not be as biblically accurate.

Because the truth is that more of our popular concepts of heaven and the afterlife and what await us are shaped more by our culture than by scripture. And the same is true of our popular concepts of hell, as well; shaped much more by Dante’s *Inferno* and works of literature of the like.

This has never been more true than the popular *Left Behind* series of the late ‘90s. It was turned into a series of movies starring Kirk Cameron and a bunch of other horrible actors. I swear, it’s like a religious Hallmark movie. But, it is a fictional story, no matter what other pastors might lead you to believe. It is fiction, and it is about what I consider to be a fictional belief, and that is the Rapture.

If you know me by now, you know that when it comes to biblical interpretation, what is *the* most important concept overall? Perspective? *Context!* Context is everything when it comes to interpreting the Bible. The context a verse is in, a paragraph is in, the chapter is in, that book of the Bible, the context that book of the Bible is in, the context of the whole narrative of scripture, the historical context as well.

And this is what happens when you take a couple of verses out of context and you make them mean what you want them to mean. Some not-quite-200 years ago, pastors like John Nelson Darby took 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 completely out of context, verses 16 and 17: “For the Lord Himself would descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” And thus so many Christians have bought the bumper sticker sold in certain Christian bookstores that says, “In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned.” Well, thanks for letting us know.

For years, men (and it's particularly men) have made bold predictions and figured out when this will take place. And people, every time that they predict, have sold everything. They've disowned family members who don't believe. They have waited and waited in fields and places around the world, and every time they have waited for this Rapture to no avail.

There's various ways of interpreting when exactly this is supposed to take place, and if you've ever been exposed to any of these teachings or delved into it yourselves, you've heard terms like "pretribulation" or "post-tribulation," and things of the like. But regardless, it's not the historic teaching of the church. It was indeed popularized by John Nelson Darby in the 1830s, 170 years ago, versus well over 1500 years of historic church interpretation. Which are you more likely to believe?

But why is the Rapture so appealing? It's because in comparison, this life is horrible. With all of our pain and disease and death and destruction and everything else we have going on in this life, it's horrible. And you might say, "Well, hold on, my life isn't so horrible." We might not think so, but we do have it really good, still, in comparison to much of the world around us. In comparison to much of human history. Put yourselves in the shoes of the poor, of the downtrodden, of the truly persecuted, and we, too, might pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, and help us escape from this world. We don't want any more suffering." And so this idea that we get plucked out before it gets a whole lot worse—I'm sold on that. Sign me up. After all, look at all the ways in which we already try to escape our own discomfort. We turn to substances and relationships and things and stuff.

As appealing as the Rapture may be, the truth of scripture, though, is even better. Nowhere in Revelation is the idea mentioned that we're going to be snatched out and Raptured out before things even get worse before they get better. Instead, in Revelation we see call after call after call, encouragement after encouragement for patience and faithfulness and endurance on our part.

The good news is that in the end, God wins, like I said before. In Revelation chapters 19 and 20, putting today's reading in context, Satan and his agents are destroyed once and for all at the second coming of Christ. All the dead are judged, and anyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire; that is the second death. Again, we're not exactly comfortable with that idea. "Wait a minute, I thought God loved everybody. Doesn't everybody get to go?" Well, not according to the words of scripture. The thing of it is that we can't write our name in the Book of Life ourselves. It's written there for us by grace, when we believe by faith in Jesus.

And there's where we pick up today's reading. The last on the series of Revelation as we turn to Advent next week. And today's reading is all about the new

creation. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” coming down out of heaven from God. The emphasis on *new*. Our God is always doing something *new*. And praise be to God for that, because if God just left everything as it is, I don’t want to be putting up with this for the rest of time, do you? We don’t want to be putting up with pain and disease and death and destruction from now until all time. We want our God to come and make everything right once and for all. To do something *new* in our midst. It’s the promise of scripture throughout. In Isaiah: “I’m doing something *new*. Do you not see it?”

The thing is, new is sometimes scary, because new often means change. And it’s change that we don’t like. Every time that Apple and Android changes their operating system and moves things around—Apple recently did it on your iPhones, and I’ve heard more than one person, more than just my wife, say, “The calendar isn’t like it used to be!”—we don’t like new, because new means change.

But God is always doing something new, all the way to the very end of time. And the Holy City is coming down out of heaven from God. It’s not anything about us going up to God. It’s the heavenly city coming out of heaven. Heaven coming down to earth, not vice versa.

And I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “I heard a voice thunder from the throne: ‘Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.’ The Enthroned continued, ‘Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.’”

Friends, I love that line. “*God has moved into the neighborhood,*” and will make his home with us. God will come to us. That’s one of the central tenets that separates Christianity from all other world religions. They’re all about us trying to get to God, us trying to earn favor with God. But our God is different. Our God not only promises to come to us, to be with us in the end, but we’ve been given a foretaste of that in the first coming of God’s son, Jesus Christ, which we are about to celebrate yet again.

A pastor friend pointed out that Jesus is the plan from the beginning, because God from the beginning has always desired to be with us. He would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening through the garden. God would walk with humanity, and it’s humanity and sin that hid themselves from God. And ever since then God is seeking to overcome that gap.

Friends, where it gets applicable is, in a year in which we’re being told where we can and can’t go, or at least we shouldn’t go, we’ve done quite a bit of waiting, haven’t we? Waiting on a vaccine. Waiting for government to get their act together. Waiting to be back to normal. And I don’t know about you, but in the waiting I feel so inadequate,

so limited, so out of control. And if there's anything we hate as human beings, it's being inadequate. It's being limited. Being told what to do by our bishop, by our governor, by whoever else. Especially we Americans, we want to do what we want to do, and we want to do it *now*, doggone it!

But what's the ultimate remedy for us, especially as followers of Jesus Christ? How about...

- ✚ Love
- ✚ Joy
- ✚ Peace
- ✚ Patience
- ✚ Kindness
- ✚ Goodness
- ✚ Faithfulness
- ✚ Gentleness
- ✚ and Self-Control?

How in the world, with everything that this world throws at us, and that Revelation says will throw us even worse, can we endure? How in the world can we continue in love and joy when things get so bad around us?

I always go back to Philippians 4, where Paul says, "Rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord *always*. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

We might turn to our theme scripture for the year, which we haven't lifted up in a while: "Seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well."

Especially this week, when many of us are modifying our Thanksgiving celebrations to limit who is coming and who is going, the truth of it is that we don't have to go anywhere, to any other source, to find fulfillment. Because God comes to us, first through His Son and always through His Spirit. And that is timeless Good News, no matter what the circumstances.

And friends, if our only goal in faith is to get to heaven, as it is in our popular ideas of heaven—friends, we will sell ourselves so short. For God has bigger promises for us—the renewal of all creation.

And so what, ultimately, will it be like? Will it be mansions? Will it be more of the best that this current earth has to offer, like sports and huge buffets of food of our making? Will it be even reuniting with family and friends? What will it be like?

There's an old story about a country doctor who would see patients in his home, and there was one patient he was seeing, a man who was given a terminal diagnosis. So as the man is contemplating his death there in the doctor's office, he asked the doctor, "What do you think heaven will be like?" And around that time they both heard scratching at the door, and the doctor knew it was the dog on the other side. The doctor looked at the man and said, "You know, I'm not sure what heaven will be like. But do you hear that noise? That's my dog. He wants in here. But he doesn't know what's in here. He's not allowed in this room. He's never been in this room. He doesn't know what it looks like. He doesn't know if anything's really for him in here, like a treat or anything. The only thing he knows is that he hears his master's voice, and he knows his master is on the other side of the door, and he wants to be where his master is."

So that's what I think heaven will be like. That's what heaven is for me, wherever my God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit might be. Anything else will be secondary.

And the really good news, friends, is that as much as we might want to be with God—our God wants to be with us even more. And He's provided the way, by believing in His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

For this world still pales in comparison. There is still so much pain, suffering and death. So hear these words at the close of Revelation, the end of the Bible itself:

"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen and Amen."

Closing Prayer

God, we're scratching at the door. We hear your voice and we want to be where you are. So we pray with the saints through all the ages: Come quickly, Lord Jesus. But

until that day, Lord, keep strong the faith that we have in you, as we give you thanks for all the foretastes of heaven, when we see heaven displayed around us through your Spirit, through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Help us to be ready as we prepare in Advent to receive Him yet again in our hearts each and every day. Especially this Advent, oh Lord, help us to look with great expectation to that day in which you will return and you will make all things right, when you will move fully into our neighborhood. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.