

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

May 15, 2022

Visions of Hope

When I lived and worked in Kentucky, I had the privilege of taking a couple of groups of youth to youth conferences at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina. Have any of you been to Montreat? I have heard from Irene that she is planning to take some of the youth from here to one of the youth conference weeks this summer. That is so exciting!!

Montreat is in the mountains of North Carolina not far from Asheville. It is a beautiful Presbyterian conference center that also houses Montreat College. The youth conferences held there in the summer are famous in the eastern Presbyterian world.

Montreat hosts 8 week long youth conferences each summer. During each of these weeks, at least before Covid, over 500 Presbyterian youth gather for a week of fun, study and fellowship. When they gather as a whole group they fill the large sanctuary there. It is a rustic wood framed structure, fitting a woodsy retreat camp. Each plenary gathering begins with worship and each worship service begins with something called energizers. Are any of you familiar with energizers? They are so fun. I love them. The energy involved is contagious. An energizer is a combination song and dance to a usually loud and lively piece of pop music. It truly does wake one up and get the blood flowing - energizes. Imagine 500 kids jumping, dancing and singing *in the pews* mind you, as they do these energizers.

A room full of loud, lively music and silly dancing seems a far cry from this text from Revelation that is our reading for this morning. It was however, that energizer time that came to mind for me this week as I reflected on these words.

One of the energizers that was a camp favorite and repeatedly requested when I was there quotes the book of Revelation.¹ The song is called Revolution and it specifically expresses some of the thoughts that are in our text for this morning, some of the same words.

Though I like this energizer, I have always found this particular one to be different from the rest. The first time I heard it I questioned whether it was appropriate to be doing at a Christian youth conference. Most of the energizers we do are upbeat and lively. This one is harsh. The singer seems almost to be yelling. We clench our fists and the motions we do are jerky and sharp. One has to listen carefully and see beyond the motions to hear and feel the good news of this energizer.

As I reflected on this suggested reading for this morning from Revelation, it occurred to me that I often feel much the same way about the book of Revelation. It is harsh, often brutal and I sometimes question why it has to be included in our scripture. I have to hear it many times and listen carefully to hear and feel the good news contained within.

Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It is some of the most well known apocalyptic literature of our scripture. The word, ‘apocalypse’, in the original Greek simply means ‘disclosure’ or ‘revelation’. The book is the revelation, the revealing, of a series of dreams and visions the author has had regarding God’s judgement and mercy for all of creation. The book has been described as, ‘an inspired picture-book that, by an accumulation of magnificent poetic imagery, makes a powerful appeal to the reader’s imagination.’² It certainly does make a powerful appeal to the reader’s imagination.

Through the centuries Revelation has, in a way, taken on a life of its own. It is a difficult book and it gets a lot of what I consider inaccurate, sensational press. As we know well, fear sells. And Revelation is full of frightening images. But as much as at times we might like to relegate it to a rarely visited back corner of our religious life, it is an important book still, in that it speaks to a time and a place where fear and violence were acute in the lives of people. It goes to those dark places and takes us there as well. It reminds us in vivid detail that our sacred text is a human text as well - written, at times at least, by people struggling with how the world in which they find themselves fits with the God they know. If we were writing Revelation today we would illustrate the suffering and anger differently

¹ Revolution, by Kirk Franklin, from the album, The Nu Nation Project.

² The Oxford Annotated Bible introduction to The Revelation of John.

than did those whose visions we see on the pages of Revelation, but the reality of suffering is no less real today. Lots of harsh sounds and sharp movements, like that energizer song.

Revelation is believed to have been written at a time when Christians in Asia were suffering serious oppression. The visions, with their elaborate symbols, details, and vivid descriptions are told to give voice to the suffering certainly, to validate the truth of what is happening in the lives of people. Yet that is not the whole picture.

Our reading for this morning comes toward the end of the book. It paints a word picture, gives us a vision, of what the final consummation of God's plan for God's creation will look like. Barbara Rossing, Lutheran pastor and professor of New Testament in Chicago writes of this passage, "Contrary to popular apocalyptic thinking, there is no 'rapture' or a future snatching of Christians up from the earth in Revelation. Instead, it is God who is 'raptured' down to earth to take up residence among us."³ As we read this morning, "See the home of God is *among mortals*. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Rev. 21:3-4)

The visions of Revelation were written not only to give voice to the fear and anger, but also to encourage and give hope, to affirm in *all* times and places the hope and the life that comes through Jesus Christ. Revelation is, above all and woven though all, a book of hope. For us as Christians, God will not only come in some future, but God has come now in the person of Jesus Christ. We can live into this promise now.

Not long ago I had a conversation with a regular church attender, not this church but near by. She told me that sometimes, late at night usually, when she reads the news on her phone or watches it on television she is frightened. She wonders about the future, for herself and those she loves. Between 24 hour news, notifications that flash on our phones every time we pick them up, our social media 'news feeds', it does not take much imagination these days to bring visions of suffering and injustice. Daily we meet the reality that our world - God's creation - is not yet to that final vision we read in Revelation. And we struggle, with how to be and how to hold onto hope.

³ Barbara Rossing, Commentary on Revelation, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1696.

I began this sermon by taking us all, with my word picture visions, to a youth conference in the mountains of North Carolina. There are times, events in our lives that bring the hope we hear in this vision we read from Revelation this morning into focus for us, right up next to the other visions that frustrate, frighten, and stir our anger. Shining light in the places of darkness. Bringing the coming kingdom of God into our here and now. Times when we get a taste from that spring of the water of life, when we see the life and the promise now, even as we know we've a long way to go. Times when the hope is renewed, by a community gathered at a mountain retreat or in a sanctuary on a sunny Sunday morning, or simply by the touch of another or the beauty of the view out of our window. And we know that in the Alpha and Omega of God the visionary writer of Revelation sees and proclaims, there is hope for our future and there is good and there is God right now.

What are your visions of hope? What sustains you and reminds you that God is good and God is here in your life? I put a portion of a poem by Emily Dickerson on the bulletin cover for this morning.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

I paired it with a beautiful painting by Lyn Johnson that I found among the church's files of the artwork he has provided for bulletin covers. The painting gives a visual image to go with the words. I like this poem, this image of hope.

I will confess that I do not always hear the hope singing on my shoulder. Sometimes I can hold the hope. Sometimes I need to be reminded by you who are my church family now, by others in my life of the alpha and omega of God, that God is and will always be in our past, our present and our future.

I am grateful for the hope bearers in my life. And though I will confess it is not my favorite, I am grateful for the words of the book of Revelation for its reminder of God presence and power even in the worst the world has to offer - a hope that as Dickerson writes, ‘never stops at all.’

May we be bearers of that hope we have in Christ, in this world in which we live today.