

Revealing Revelation: Easter Worship Series

“City of God”

Sermon Text: Revelation 21:1-6

5th Sunday of Easter

FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011

24 April 2016

“The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one” (Albert Einstein 1879—1955)

Hear the day’s lesson:

1 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. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “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; 4 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.”

5 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.” 6a Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 21:1-6).

An author named Bill Bryson wrote a book called *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

Although many dispute whether or not the title is accurate in terms of “short” or of being about “nearly everything,” the 500+ page book does address a lot of material between the Big Bang and the advance of civilization. It is a book that tries to tell us about our origins as human beings—how and why—we came to be as we are. Bryson writes about people who are archaeologists, anthropologists, and mathematicians, plumbing the depths of their creative minds to discover what they thing about what makes us tick. People are endlessly fascinated by people and the story of how we came to be. Thus this book has been pretty successful.

Yet if we were to speak of a book that gives us a sense of the non-scientific purpose of our lives and origin, the Bible certainly fits the bill. We like stories that explain where we can from—or our parents or grandparents—generally our ancestors. Why did they do what they did and how did they do it. How did they get to Texas from Scotland or Ghana? What hardships did they both face and overcome? We all have questions that the books of the Bible attempt to explain:

where the rainbow comes from, how did we get the Sabbath, why people get married, as well as why Isaac's name was changed to Israel. Slightly different than Bill Bryson's aim, the Bible nonetheless is about how the world and everything that dwells in it was created by God. People ask is the Bible literally true or is it a story that uses analogy, parable, and allegory to make its points. The answer of course is what John Wesley suggested when he said in effect: "As literal as possible, as figurative as necessary." Thus although many are waiting for final confirmation of the question, "Did Adam have a belly-button?" most Christians know that this is not an ultimate sort of question. Our questions are more concerned with roots and sources of our lives.

Not only are people like us concerned about where we came from. We are also endlessly fascinated by where it is that we think we are going. We want to know both about our arrival and also about our departure. In the olden days people were much more interested in the future than we seem to be now. Currently the idea of where I am going after I die is not all that a pressing issue for many unless one has a vault secured in a cryogenics laboratory (Someone is frozen and brought back to life. It's called cryonics). And to be fair, we must admit that our past has empirical evidence while our future has little but speculation—at least with respect to science.

Yet our lesson today is part of God's covenant with his creation and that especially of the man and the woman who occupied the garden. Genesis 1:28 tells us that "God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The story of Genesis outlines a theological narrative about our origins and I suggest that Revelation does the same with respect to our ultimate destiny. So, just as a story of origin offers us more than just a descriptive play-by-play account of events that led up to our present moment, so do "narratives of destination" offer more than a structure of future events. Reasonably, they answer the question "Where are you going?" in a much broader sense: Where are you headed? In what direction is your life taking you? What is your true destination?

The book of Revelation is an eschatology (a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind) in a larger sense. Just as the book of Genesis is meant to help us understand our origins in the broadest terms, so the book of Revelation is intended to help us understand our ultimate destination. The answer to both questions—where we are from and where we are headed—is the same: God. Our ultimate origins are in God, and our ultimate end is in God as well. As T. S. Eliot wrote, “In my end is my beginning:” our final destination is the same as where we started. Some ancient Christian thinkers identified this pattern with the Latin words *exitus* and *reditus*: “all things come forth from God, and all things ultimately return to God” (See: Augustine’s *Confessions*).

God is our covenant God because God created us and God will bring us hope—that is the promise. Certainly our beginnings and our endings as people and as part of creation is nicely bookended by Genesis and Revelation.

Apocalyptic literature conveys eschatology (doctrine of end times) in a certain structure. The basic concept is that our present age is under an evil influence and that God’s faithful ones suffer persecution. In addition, this suffering increases until God intervenes on behalf of God’s people and inaugurates a new age of peace and joy. If apocalyptic is the form of these prophecies then “eschatology” simply describes the content of the “end times” doctrine. At its most basic level eschatology suggests that at some moment in the world’s history all will cease. Then, God will complete God’s work begun at creation. How God conveys God’s promised covenant will be the content of our lesson from Revelation next week, but let me peek ahead and tell you about God symbolized by light. God’s covenant put us in God’s light!

Light and sight are precious commodities but, like air, we easily take for granted. For those conscious of their absence we doubly understand their value. God’s revelation becomes matter of fact when received as a given in life. But during the darkness of individual tragedy or in the bleakness of the world’s latest political episodes, the light of God’s hope is a true sanctuary.

How God is the light is always a difficult image to explain to people bent on cross-examination, like a group of eager sixth-grade confirmands, for example. God's light for us is . . . well "It is like when your baby sister cries in the night and your mother goes in to turn the night light on," I explained with the best shot in the dark I could muster. The sixth graders nodded in agreement. We had all been there.

There is great joy in heaven and on earth when the light comes and comes on. Our Christian scripture ends on a hopeful note that is a good word as we begin the light lengthening days of spring and then summer. In the Revelation of St. John the Divine the apocalyptic seer writes: "And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5). This Easter we live in that hope as we un-wrap our darkness to make a space for light—God's light! Amen.

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