

“The Gift”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 2, 2010

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 145:8-18
Revelation 21:1-6

I spent part of last week at a conference with the director of a Christian service agency located in Buloxi, Mississippi. For the last four and a half years they have been helping residents rebuild their homes and put their lives together after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: raising money and hosting teams of volunteers. Finally, several months ago, they moved into their own newly rebuilt offices.

Over the last year, though, the poor economy has meant that a large part of their funding and donations have dried up. Now, many of the social services that they have been doing over the past few decades – specifically, helping the hungry and the homeless – are near having to be cut. This, coupled with the news that the oil spill off the Gulf Coast might create new economic hardships, has created restlessness and anxiety within the organization as well as the larger community. The same waters that caused the initial damage, and then brought attention and resources to the area, are now threatening to wreak new havoc.

The people of the Gulf Coast – as she told us – have a long and complicated relationship with water. It is at the same time both life-giving and life-threatening. As residents have experienced in recent years, *it giveth and it taketh away*. This is not unlike the relationship that the ancients in the Bible had with water. The sea was, for them, a dangerous place from which they obtained much of their food and livelihood. But, as we are reminded when we look at the Gulf Coast, storms could arise without warning, which jeopardized their short and long-term security.

It should be no surprise, then, that when – in Revelation – the new reign of God is envisioned, the sea is described as being no more. Gone, therefore, with the sea is the chaos of its unpredictable storms; its indiscriminate destruction. In the creation story in Genesis, the chaos of the seas are spoken into order by God, but now, in the new creation, all of these things have passed away.

All of this is possible because heaven and earth will become one, meaning that God and humanity will dwell together. No longer will the question arise whether God is present within the storms of life, because God will always be present, and the storms will be no more. Death will be no more; mourning, crying and pain will be no more, just as the sea is no more – none of these things can exist in that coming time and place when God and God’s people dwell together.

Because of God's presence in this new creation, every tear will also be wiped away. This promise is interesting given the fact that there will be no more crying – what, then, are the tears to be wiped away? Are they tears of joy, tears of remembrance, tears of awe for a God who can and will so completely transform the world as we know it?

I think I have an idea of what this means. There are times and places where tears can be the most appropriate and genuine of all human emotions. Tears can be incredibly healing for those who are in need of cleansing and release. When shed in the presence of others, they show the need for empathy, encouragement and support. When they are shed behind closed doors, they reveal the need we have for God to come in and take away our burdens and heal us in an otherwise unimaginable way. Tears might come because we feel chaos in our lives, but they actually provide order to our lives; they are living symbols of how deeply we care.

Tears signify that we thirst for something more substantial than just plain water. In the new creation of Revelation, we are left with this promise from God: “to the thirsty, I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” If there really are, as the Eric Clapton song suggests, *Tears in Heaven*, then it signifies that heaven will be a place of true living. We will continue to hunger and thirst – hopefully for meaningful things such as justice and righteousness – but all of our physical and emotional cravings will be met. Love and life will be just as vibrant and precious as on this earth. And the water that truly quenches will be the living water – that which springs forth from God.

And so, this passage ends with this wonderfully rich image of living water; which takes us back to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Her amazement was that Jesus knew everything about her life, and therefore was able to meet her greatest needs; to fulfill her deepest longings. She began by questioning Jesus about what was the proper place for worship – on this mountain or in that city – but what she discovered as being really important was not where – or how or when – but who. Who do we worship? Who do we put first in our lives? In whom do we place our ultimate trust?

The image of living water connects us to the creation around us – to the world of animals and birds that naturally gravitate toward sources of life-giving water. Perhaps this can give us also a vision of what we can be together – many people of different backgrounds and traditions coming to a common watering place? A vision for a creation where there is water and sustenance for all?¹

¹ William Loader, *First Thoughts on the Lectionary*

The hope that is revealed in these final chapters of Revelation is for a new heaven and a new earth – both, not one or the other. As Christians, we have been called to walk by faith and not by sight. We have not seen this New Jerusalem; glimpses maybe, but not the complete vision. Still, we have a choice to make. Do we believe – as may do – that the world is coming to an end in rapid fashion? Or do we trust that it is God’s intention to ultimately come and dwell among us – redeeming the world, rather than witnessing its destruction?

If we choose to believe the latter, then the question becomes: what are we doing to prepare the earth to be a place where God would want to come and live? What can we be doing to serve as good stewards of the earth – savoring and preserving the beauty of God’s creation? In what ways are we meeting the deep human need for compassion, forgiveness and community? How are we preparing the fields and planting the seeds that we believe God will bring to life?

There certainly are other gospels that are being proclaimed around us. Some say: “take what you can get,” because this is the only life that matters. Others say: “God is punishing us” when disasters strike because they think our choices have moved the world beyond the point of redemption.

But, the gospel that Jesus proclaimed was that those who drink of the living water that he has to give will never thirst again. He came to world not to condemn it, but so that it might have life, and life eternal. Although we may not be able to see it – or to see it as clearly as we would like – God gives us the gift of faith that we can imagine it. We can also imagine that the God who would give us the gift of Jesus Christ would want us to experience life in its fullness, and to be present when God comes to dwell with us again.

Rob Bell says, don’t be so sure when someone tells you – or when you try to tell yourself – that you don’t have faith. Like life, faith is something which has been breathed into all of us as a part of God’s creation.² The question is, what do you need to see in order to recognize the faith that has already been gifted to you? Living by faith and not by sight, that is what we are challenged to do.

“Behold, I am making all things new.” These words can be scary because we are not able to recognize those things we haven’t yet seen. To us, they are unfamiliar, maybe even strange. Nonetheless, they are a gift that will reflect the giver; and if the gift is from God – the God of creation and re-creation; the God who sent His Son to dwell with us so that we might one day dwell with Him – then it will be good. AMEN.

² Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*