

Revelations 21:1-10 ¹Then 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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 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." ⁵And 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." ⁶Then 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." ⁹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰And in the Spirit, he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

Revelations 21:22-22:5 ²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. ^{22:1}Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And 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.

Revelations 21:1-10 and 21:22-22:5
05/26/2019 – Saginaw First U.M.C.
"For the Healing of the Nations"
Rev. Amy Terhune

"One of the best comedy sketches I remember from my childhood is a Marty Feldman routine set in the waiting room at a veterinarian's office. There on a bench sit regular-looking people with regular animals. One woman has a canary in a cage. Other's have cats or dogs, mostly in little carriers, crates, or kennels. Then in comes Marty Feldman, pushing a huge box that shudders and lurches about from the struggles of the creature inside. Every imaginable odd animal sound can be heard, and fur, feathers, and dust all came belching out of the box. At one point, the top flies open, and Feldman grabs an umbrella from the guy next to him, jabbing, poking and slashing to keep the beast inside. When he finally gets the lid back on the box, all that's left of the umbrella is the handle and few black tatters. "What in the world is in there?" asks the man sitting next to him with a cute little cat carrier. To which Marty Feldman, with his wild hair going every direction and his huge eyes darting all over the place, responds, "To be frank, I don't really know. It followed me home one day and I haven't the heart to get rid of it. You get so

attached, you know. I've consulted every encyclopedia and book of animal biology I could find with no success. But I think I finally found a book that describes him." "What book is that?" asked the man next to him. With his quintessential bug-eyed intensity, Feldman responds, "The Book of Revelation."

[adapted significantly from an All Saints Sunday Sermon in "*Good God, Where In The World Are You?*" By George Paul Mocko, www.Sermons.com. To view the actual skit, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIPAVm8G16M>.]

No doubt, that's probably how a lot of us think of the book of Revelation—some weird and obscure piece of work filled with unintelligible allegories that somehow talks about the end of the world and has been twisted by some of the most notorious figures in history to justify some pretty crazy stuff. When push comes to shove, most of us could come up with the word Apocalypse to describe this kind of writing, although the modern students often assumes that apocalyptic means "end of the world". It doesn't—it actually means 'unveiled' or 'revealing' (hence the name of the book: Revelation). Ironically, we today would probably say there is no book in all the Bible that is more veiled or less revealing than Revelation. When asked to describe it, we may call to mind old, wild predictions related to opaque numerology, fiery-eyed bible thumpers preaching hell and damnation, and vague spiritualists outlining some shrouded vision of the future for a select few. Some of you may even wonder why a sane preacher would bother with the fantastical images outlined in Revelation, especially when its be used by Hitler to speak of the Third Reich or radio preachers to casually explain the 9/11 disasters or how Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, ISIS terrorists and countless others represent the antichrist.

But according to George Paul Mocko, who also referenced the Marty Feldman routine (although he never actually mentions Marty Feldman when describing it), "Certainly Revelation is heavy with allegory and poetic imagery. But it is not that impossible to understand, if you just step back from it a few paces. Far from a wild, chaotic outpouring, it is probably the most carefully constructed and organized book in the entire Bible. After the introductory letters to the seven churches, there are seven sections, each with exactly seven subsections."

"The theme of the entire book is persecution – the persecution the church was then suffering, in roughly the year 95 A.D. The various visions speak of this persecution going on for forty-two months, which is three and one-half years, or more accurately, half of seven, which is the ancient number of fulfillment. In other words, the persecution is only half the story. History is still in God's hands, and after the persecution is spent, God will bring it all to a glorious fulfillment. That is the theme of Revelation: Persecution - persecution which will end, and the fulfillment beyond." [2 ¶s from from an All Saints Sunday Sermon in "*Good God, Where In The World Are You?*" By George Paul Mocko, www.Sermons.com.]

In other words: Hope. The author of Revelation offers a vision of hope for their future—a vision in which suffering, sadness, and danger are no longer threats. But let me be very clear: contrary to popular belief, Revelation is really not so concerned with our future as it is with our present. It was written, not to frighten us about the end time, but to challenge the choices and values that govern us right now. Although there is relatively little apocalyptic writing in the standard Bible cannon, it was a common form of theological expression in the first and second centuries because the symbolic nature was supposed to transport the reader beneath whatever was going on in the world at that moment in order to grasp deep truths of eternal significance. The fact that we have, across the centuries, found ourselves more intrigued with decoding the symbols than with discovering the truths therein reflects our all-too-human nature. So let's talk about truth and eternal significance. Let's talk about the choices and the values we face today. Let's talk about what God may intend us to know, not merely for someday in the sweet by and by, but right now in May of 2019.

John describes a new Jerusalem coming down to settle on the earth. The old passes and the new has come. And in the new, he writes, the home of God is among mortals. God dwells with them. The original Greek word there is "tabernacle" in verb form. God "tabernacles" with us. The new Jerusalem is marked, first and foremost, by our intimate relationship with God. Jesus Christ who became flesh returns to dwell among us. What John would say to us is that the incarnation we celebrate every Christmas is not a once-upon-a-time reality. It's an eternal reality. God still pitches his tent down here

among our houses and apartments. God stays close. John clearly intends his community to realize, even as it undergoes great trial, that God is with them. God has forever pitched his tent with us. It's not just a Christmas thing. It's a God thing. Presence. Connection. Relationship. Understanding. That's not for December 25th alone. That is God's mission. And Revelations would remind us that no matter how remote or distant God seems, especially when we're suffering, it isn't the reality we've come to know.

Steven E. Albertin tells a story "...about an urban congregation in a changing neighborhood of one of our eastern cities. The congregation had decided not to flee to the suburbs but to stay in the city and serve the needs of its crumbling neighborhood. The need was great—there were immigrants, there were drug problems, there was gun violence, there was teen pregnancy, and mental illness, and hunger and homelessness. There was suffering, and only so much money to go around. As a result, the church council decided that instead of repairing aging stained-glass windows, it would simply replace them with a more functional clear glass. But one of their windows contained a gorgeous stained-glass image of the heavenly Jerusalem. When one of it's lovely golden panes was broken, the council felt that such an image was too otherworldly for a congregation committed to justice in the city, and they made plans to remove the window and replace with plain glass.

"Then someone pointed out that when you stood in the sanctuary and looked out through that old stained-glass image of the heavenly Jerusalem and saw the neighborhood surrounding the church, suddenly that decaying neighborhood appeared in a whole new light. That window literally reflected the mission of that congregation—to bring God close. Through their ministry of compassion to the needs of their neighborhood, they might be the only little bit of heaven on earth another would encounter. Through them, the people in their neighborhood, struggling to eke out a meager living in a hostile world, could catch a glimpse of the victory already won through the blood of the lamb. So they kept that window, the maintained it, because we all need reminders that God has taken up residence in the world we live in. [2 ¶]s adapted from "Heaven on Earth" by Steven E. Albertin, www.Sermons.com.]

The new Jerusalem is marked, first and foremost, by God's presence with us. That is eternal truth. But here's a second inescapable truth: The new Jerusalem is also a community. It's not a tree with many branches or a bird with great wings or any other symbol that descends to us. It's not a flowery meadow or an idyllic farm. It's a city. It's got streets. It's got people. It's busy. The new Jerusalem is not set apart on the mountaintop. It springs up where the people are. This is not to say that you can necessarily pin it to a specific geographic location. Don't get too caught up in specifics like that. Rather, it means to communicate that paradise—the perfect and ideal human existence—happens in community.

I want to read you a little something that Christopher Rowland writes in his commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible* on these passages from Revelation. "There has been much debate over the extent to which human endeavor can contribute to the New Jerusalem. Can human initiative help in any way with bringing about the coming of the reign of God, or should one just leave it in God's hands? In Revelation 21, the fact that... the kings of the earth bring their glory into the city suggest that humans do contribute to its distinctive character. The city may be from Heaven, but humans can be the means of channeling God's grace into it. So we have here's some support for the notion of "building the kingdom". It is not all left to some eschatological miracle. Human agents infused with the Spirit of the new creation may contribute to that future reign of God here and now in the midst of the debris of the old world. [from "The Book of Revelation: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" by Christopher C. Rowland in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) pg. 730.]

If I've got this right, the building of the Kingdom begins when we bring our gifts and graces to the community. Leonard Sweet tells about "...a remote river known as Cano Cristales located about two hours outside of the tiny community of La Macarena, Columbia. Like most rivers of the world, the water flow of Cano Cristales is tied to the seasons. In the wet, rainy season, the river flows deep and has strong currents. It is clear and cool. During the dry season the water levels drop, the water temperatures rise, pools become puddles, strong rapids become small rivulets.

“But for a small window of time, when the water levels are just right, when the temperatures are just right, when the amount of sunlight is just right, the Cano Cristales is transformed into “the most colorful river in the world”, and is known as “the river that ran away to paradise”.... During that short window of time, Cano Cristales blooms with the natural algae and moss populations that otherwise live dormant among its rocky pools and streambeds. Reds, purples, blues, greens, yellows, a rainbow of blooms paint the riverbed as it streams along. Natural pools and waterfalls blaze with the colors of the living plants. Tourists gladly flock into the tiny town of La Macarena and then trek on foot for two hours in order to reach this remote, miraculous beauty. Nothing could more beautifully illustrate “living water.”

“Nothing, that is, unless it is casserole you take to your neighbors while she is recovering from another round of chemotherapy.

“Nothing, that is, unless it is the ride home you give to kids whose parents can’t be bothered.

“Nothing, that is, unless it is teaching Sunday school to squirming 8 year olds, or squirming 15 year olds, or squirming 40 year olds, or squirming 70 year olds.

“Nothing, that is, unless it is volunteering make sandwiches or pack backpacks or help with meals or do a hundred other things that refresh and revive the suffering right here in Saginaw in the name of Christ.

“It matters. Living water must be continually poured out into the church, into the community, into our homes. Unless living water is poured out, it goes stagnant and stale. [7 ¶s adapted from “Time to Get Wet” by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.] Paradise is a city, nourished with living water from God’s throne, and purposed with the task of healing. The author notes that the leaves of the trees are given for the healing of the nations, which seems to suggest that the healing power of peace and justice has been written into the very fabric of creation. God is with us is truth. We’re meant to give. We’re made to work together in the light of God’s love. That is a final truth of this lesson.

To that end, John includes a strange and fascinating little detail. He notes that the sea will be no more. Ever think about that? The fact is, most of us probably like the sea, especially if we’re perched on a warm, sunny beach beneath palm trees, caressed by tropical breezes. But to the ancient Hebrews, the sea represented all that was most fearsome in the world. They assert that power of God by noting God’s ability to control and tame the sea. “The sea is identified with the untamed, disruptive powers of chaos. The sea harbored monsters and demonic forces that constantly threatened human existence. Little wonder that John’s vision calls for these unknown waters to dry up and cease to exist.” [from Leonard Sweet’s commentary on Revelation 21:1-6, www.Sermons.com.] We can’t take it literally. Rather, John clearly intends that we confront all that scares us, all the limits us. Ultimately, these things have no power over us. God has overcome every barrier. And what really what stands in the way of change and redemption is our own fear.

Unlike the deep, dark swells of the fearsome sea, God’s light permeates the city. The light is God’s “...final culminating victory over darkness... Even more, the city gates – all 12 of them – remain open and welcoming at all times. There are no powers of darkness, spiritual or visual, which necessitate their closure.” [from Leonard Sweet’s commentary on Revelation 21:1-6, www.Sermons.com.] In the fourth chapter of his first letter, John writes that perfect love casts out all fear. Here is the visual image of that reality. With the light comes the love of God. And with the love of God comes the confidence to repent and change.

I want to close with a story about Frederik Kaan, who was born in 1929 and entered adolescence as the Nazis overtook his hometown of Haarlem in the Netherlands. Kaan’s parents were committed Christians who opposed the Nazi regime and were active in the Dutch Resistance. As a very young man, Kaan watched his parents courageously hide Jews and other fugitives in their home until they could be shuttled on to safety. They also hid guns and ammunition, and never turned away a hungry soul. Those formative experiences in his life would have a lasting effect on his soul. He admired their courage and conviction, and dedicated his life to Christ. Kaan eventually went to England, where he studied to

become a clergyman in the congregational church. While serving at Pilgrim Church in Plymouth, England, Kaan was tapped to become the minister-secretary of the International Congregational Council. As he prepared to leave England and take his new post in Geneva, he penned some words for his congregation at Pilgrim just before Christmas in 1968. The War in Vietnam was escalating, apartheid in South Africa was being drawn to the world's attention, environmental degradation in South America was creating systems of poverty, disease, and political unrest across the continent, and Race Riots erupted here in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Assassination. This was the world Kaan was being called to relate to as an emissary for the church. As he thumbed through the pages of his Bible late one night, he read again these famous words from our text for today. That night, his prayer—like John's and so many other saints across the centuries—took shape. [information here gleaned from Wikipedia and from *The United Methodist Companion to the Hymnal* by Carlton R. Young (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993) pg. 344.]

For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord,
For a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us forward into freedom, from despair your world release,
That, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned:
Pride of status, race or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice may we hallow brief life's span.

You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind;
For our growing in your likeness bring the life of Christ to mind;
That by our response and service earth its destiny may find.