

DISCERNING THE HAND OF GOD IN OUR WORLD

Easter 6 – Cycle C: Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10; 22:15; John 14:23-29

I have never noticed it before this week, but there is a wonderful symmetry in the Bible created by the first and last books, Genesis and Revelation. In Genesis, there is a vision of life as it was given by God in all its purity and excellence. The Garden of Eden myth describes (as John Milton called it) “paradise” established on earth. Within a few paragraphs, however, Genesis relates how paradise was lost through human sinfulness. In the closing pages of the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, we read the vision of John of Patmos of heaven returning to earth, of paradise restored, and of sin destroyed. In the books between Genesis and Revelation, we have nothing less than story after story of God’s pursuit of the human soul; the will of God to give fallen humanity a second chance, and a third chance, and a fourth. In the exchange Jesus has in Matthew’s Gospel with Peter on the question of forgiveness, it is easy for us to read into Jesus’ reply that people are to forgive one another for as many times as it takes to effect lasting change, because that is precisely how God deals with the whole of humanity. And in fact, the Bible is nothing less than a record of human failure to live in God’s way, and God’s seemingly untiring capacity to forgive and restore people and nations with the goal of saving us from ourselves.

In this morning’s Second Reading, the selection from Revelation, John’s imagery is rich and striking, and quite reminiscent of Jesus’ prophecy in today’s Gospel of Jesus and the Father making their home with us. John of Patmos writes of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Like Eden, the new Jerusalem provides everything God’s beloved ones need to live forever in perfect harmony and peace. From the throne of God runs the river of the water of life, bright as crystal. John has no need to explain to his readers the meaning of this image. We know that to drink from that river is to receive eternal life. And on either side of the river of life is rooted the tree of life. We know from Genesis that to eat the fruit of the tree of life in Eden means that we will not die; that in the heaven of God’s presence we live forever in perfect communion with the eternal One. The tree in John’s vision, however, has magnificent leaves. Perhaps they are like the leaves of the aloe plant, because John says that these leaves are for the healing of the nations. Like rubbing a split aloe leaf on a burn or a cut, the hurts and losses of peoples and nations are healed, and peace is restored by the leaves of the tree of life.

We notice a marked difference in the new Jerusalem in Revelation and the vision of paradise we have in the Garden of Eden. In the new Jerusalem, there is no serpent. In the new Jerusalem, Satan has been destroyed in the ultimate battle waged by God in Christ Jesus on the cross of Calvary. Death and sin have lost their power. In testimony to the victory, John writes of the new Jerusalem, “there will be no more night; [the people] have no need of light or lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

We need this vision from the Book of Revelation and other signs of the good news of God as the subtext for our life in the Spirit. The world in which we live is not the new Jerusalem, but we must do everything in our power to proclaim its truth, to proclaim God’s power, God’s victory in Christ’s resurrection, for our time and place.

There’s an undeniable sense of ultimacy in Jesus’ words to his disciples in this morning’s Gospel. The reading, known as Jesus’ farewell discourse, is often read in Lent, but also late in the Easter season, just before the Ascension of Our Lord and the last Sunday of Easter. This morning, we find ourselves in this latter place on the church calendar, and hear that Jesus has knowledge of a succession plan for the time after his ascension. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, he says, will teach the disciples everything they need to know, and also help them recall things that Jesus has taught them during his time with them. Jesus is facing his own death and the end of his ministry on earth. Jesus is, in reality, saying farewell to his beloved disciples. At the same time, he speaks of a different reality, a spiritual gift that the disciples, that *all* disciples will receive in order to live the risen life; life on earth informed by proclamation of God’s unbounded love, of God’s power and activity, of God’s abiding presence. “Those who love me,” Jesus tells his disciples, “will keep my word” – “keep faith with me,” in other words – and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Jesus then promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit which will continue to call them, guide and direct them, allowing them to continue what he has begun proclaiming God’s good news.

For the apostle Paul, the bidding of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Risen Christ were one and the same. Christ was truly present with Paul, especially, he discovered as he did missionary work in uncharted mission fields. In this morning's First Reading, we see him called in a vision to travel to Macedonia with the good news of Jesus Christ. And in a most surprising turn of events, he finds welcome in a foreign land. More importantly, though, his message finds welcome in the heart of Lydia and her household. Through her, the church was established in Macedonia and prospered.

You and I need to live with a vision of John's new Jerusalem; we need to live with the promise of Christ's abiding presence and peace as communicated in today's Gospel; we need to listen, as Paul did, for the bidding of the Holy Spirit in our individual lives and in our life together in the church.

On Saturday, May 4, our Church Council had a remarkable day as we considered together what it means to live the risen life; to recognize not only the presence of Christ for us but also the presence of Christ within and among us. Over and over our retreat leader, Nancy Kelly, asked the question "What is the Spirit saying to the church?" Our visions were not heavenly, they were as close and as earthly as our neighbours at Pinehaven and in Lincoln Village and at Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church and at KidsAbility, and at Sandowne and Lexington Schools, and (as councillor Jane Ann McLachlan reminded us) in the Developing World. They were this-world images, but we began to see them and ourselves with a God's-eye-view. Paul's journey and our journey, the mission of Jesus' disciples and our mission are one and the same: we have apostolic succession.

Paul had no trouble seeing the hand of God at work in the world. No one had a more dramatic conversion than he had had; and in the dynamism of that grace-filled encounter with the Spirit of the Risen Christ, he did everything in his power to proclaim God's love and forgiveness for all people – that's the meaning of today's story from Macedonia; all people and nations – God's love and forgiveness revealed in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he also wanted others to see the hand of God in the world, bringing them into relationship with one another as children of God; communicating in word and deed and love and acceptance the utter meaninglessness of sin and the absolute necessity of living with a knowledge and understanding of God's unbounded love for all people.

That is our call, both as individual Christians and together as we form the church; to live the risen life, the life of our high calling.

Jesus is our tree of life. And the good news of the gospel is that in these in-between times, the time between Christ's resurrection and Christ's coming again, the earth, the world in which we live, is God's garden.

[The hymn which followed was There in God's Garden, Hymn 342 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.]