



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
15 May 2022  
Sermon: All Things New  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Revelation 21:1-7

### **Revelation 21:1-7 (NRSV)**

**21** 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. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> 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 and be their God;  
<sup>4</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> Then 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. <sup>7</sup> Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

This week in researching for what I believe is my first non-funeral sermon ever on the book of Revelation, I spent far more time than I should have looking at old editions of the newspaper comic *The Far Side* by Gary Larson for inspiration about the afterlife. A few examples:

- A man sits on a white cloud, alone, bare-feet, white robe, with halo and wings attached; he looks a bit bored; a thought bubble above him reads, “Wish I’d brought a magazine.”
- A second picture of heaven: Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame stands before the pearly gates of heaven, except in this version of heaven, the gates decorated all over with grand, golden statues of chickens, the thought bubble over Colonel Sanders’ head reads, “uh oh”
- In another, a long line of desolate people, their clothes torn in rags, the fires of hell rage all around them, devils above them with pitch forks. One man stands next to a coffee pot and exclaims, “Oh, man! The coffee’s cold. They’ve thought of everything!”
- Another, very similar. Hell fire all around. In the center, a man walks by carrying a heavy load in a wheelbarrow; but he has a smile on this face, he is whistling a tune. One devil turns to another and says, “You know, we’re just not reaching that guy.”

Then I looked at less harmless appropriations of Christian apocalyptic images. A side note: Did you all know that the book of Revelation never actually uses the term Antichrist? Rather, it employs other images for the powers and principalities opposed to God: the dragon, the beast, Babylon?

But that doesn’t stop fringe writers from naming people they believe are opposed to Christ and ushering in the end of times. In a section I’m going to call ‘books we will never study at Grace Covenant,’ let me introduce you to:

- *The Fourth Beast: Is Donald Trump the Antichrist?*
- If that doesn’t suit your political needs, there’s always *Barack Obama: Prophecy, and the Destruction of the United States: Is Barack Obama Fulfilling Biblical...and Other related American Prophecies*

- Don't worry, there's more – For our Millennials, there's *Is George Bush the Antichrist? A Guide to Armageddon*
- Heading back to the 90s, there was *Tickling the Tail of the Dragon: The Bloodline of the Antichrist*, which about Bill Clinton's family lineage
- Oddly enough, there isn't a book or series that I could find about George H.W. Bush, but not to worry, there is *Ronald Regan: Antichrist* with not the most impressive book cover I've ever seen.
- And last but certainly not least *Jimmy Carter: The President Who Will Meet Mr. 666 (The AntiChrist) Soon!* All of these are, yes, real books, and currently sold on Amazon.

It is important to know what Revelation actually says, and why it was actually written, because its obscurity and its stark images are so easily appropriated, misused, and abused. As we heard last week, in our practice of Lectio Divina, many of our experiences with the book have been when it was abused by people saying who is in and who is out, who belongs and who does not. And usually that means marginalizing those already pushed to the margins by our society and the church.

But in reality, if it is anything, the book of Revelation was intended to be good news for those pushed to the margins. Our passage today reads:

*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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
The Lord will dwell with them;  
they will be God's peoples,  
and God will be with them and be their God.*

The first thing to know is that this is a text written to Christians, warning of the possibility of violence by the Roman Empire in the early days of the faith, if they would not participate in the national Roman religion, which meant worshipping the emperor. In other words, this is a text of resistance, and a promise that God is with those struggling under the boot of empire.

These Christ followers proclaim, against every imperial message that they heard in their day, that it is Jerusalem, not Rome, that is the center of God's work in the world.

And it is God upon the throne, not Nero, not Domitian (Doe-mish-an), or any other Caesar or President who claimed power over their lives.

“Then God 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.” God is the source of life, our beginning and end; not the rulers who claim supremacy over all creation.

How ironic, then, how predictable, that this text and the promises of our future with God would be taken over by the very powers and principalities that this book resists.

- Jerusalem today is anything but the center of peace. It is place filled with tears, “mourning and crying and pain,” where if you are Palestinian, your movement is heavily restricted, watched, disrupted. A place where gunfire and rockets are exchanged regularly. Where, we saw this week, you cannot even report on the streets without risking your life.
- And authoritarians all over this world employ these images. In his justification for the invasion of Ukraine this week, Vladimir Putin of Russia described the war he started in apocalyptic terms. “Torturers, death squads and Nazis,” he called the people of

Ukraine, a people forced to flee or fight for their homes, a country torn apart in the name of greed and imperialism.

- And such abuse of the book is rooted in our history as well. This week our government confirmed that the graves of over 500 indigenous children have been found around the boarding schools of our country – the City on a Hill, the New Jerusalem it was once called – used to erase and eradicate native cultures. Revelation's vision employed as a nightmare, as an atrocity.
- A list of abuses done in the name and in the imagery of Revelation could go on and on.

So why keep turning to Revelation? Why do we hold on to this text? Why, for many of us, are these words held so close to our hearts? It is precisely because Revelation was written for times like these, it was given to the Church to resist abuses like these.

Revelation was written for times when the powers and principalities of this world seem overwhelming.

- For the times, like today, when our rights, for the women of this country, even rights to their own bodies, seem up to political debate.
- Or, for those pushed to the margins of this country, for when those rights never granted in the first place.
- For days like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before, for years, for decades, as white supremacist violence surges, when it erupts, when it kills – 10 people killed in a grocery store yesterday in Buffalo, our hearts break again.
- For the years, when it seems like we will never get a rest from the onslaught of this pandemic.
- For the tragedies of our lives.
- For the griefs that we hold.

- For the injustices, the systems of sin, the hierarchies and disparities, the wars and rumors of war that seem to have a death-grip on this world.

In those times, in these times, we turn to the back of the Bible. And God says, “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.”

To trust Revelation’s vision is to trust in the God who liberates and vindicates and gives life to those crushed by empire.

It is to proclaim that in our future with God,

*Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.*

It is to work towards that future – even when it seems so far away – that future when we see one another, and treat one another, as the children of God.

And when you catch glimpses of that future – in songs sung, truths told and realized, fellowship shared, lies exposed, history remembered, resources shared, in services like this one, and in places far outside of any church walls – we can point to it, and proclaim, “You see, you see: God is making all things new.”

God is making all things new.  
God is making all things new.

And for that, we say, thanks be to God.