

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 22, 2022

ACTS 16:9-15 | PSALM 67 | REVELATION 21:10, 22-22:5 | JOHN  
14:23-29

There's something about the book of Revelation that makes many mainline Protestants, including me, a little bit nervous. If someone tells us that they love John's gospel or they've been really digging into book of Isaiah, we'd probably think nothing of it. But if someone told us they'd been making some interesting connections while doing a deep dive of Revelation, we might start getting a little bit skeptical. Even a cursory read gives you some indication of why. It's full of big dragons, precious stones, and cryptic symbols. The whole thing is just a little bit much.

But deep down, I'd guess the vivid images aren't really what we're hung up on. After all, we're big fans of magical realism, the Marvel universe, and concept albums by 80s prog rock bands. We know how to get invested in a universe other than our own.

The issue, for many of us, is that Revelation is a book about hope. And it is completely, unabashedly earnest about that. If you're someone who is a bit jaded by life and thinks that hope is for suckers, Revelation is going to annoy you. Because John speaks about God's action like it's not a metaphor. If you're someone who thinks that the best you can hope for is to make situations marginally better, Revelation is going to frustrate you. Because it's never going to tell you that it's good enough. And if you're someone who thinks that God's promised future is mostly a little sliver of you that exists after death, Revelation is going to surprise you. Because God's future involves more of you than you might expect, and more people than you might invite.

Last week, you might remember that we heard about how the city of God comes to earth. And this week, we hear about more about what that city looks like. We get the guided tour of the city. And John, the author of the book, does this funny little move here where he recalls the prophet Ezekiel's tour of Jerusalem but reimagines it.<sup>1</sup> When Ezekiel tours Jerusalem, there's a magnificent temple. And there's large walls to keep out their enemies. There's a class of priests who do the spiritually important stuff. And the whole thing is very impressive.

John's vision is even more impressive but for different reasons. In John's vision of the New Jerusalem, there is no temple. Because the presence of God fills all in all. There are no walls surrounding the city. John says that the city has gates, but the gates will never be shut. And there are no priests. Because everyone has taken on their vocation of serving God and neighbor. And in the middle of that city is a garden,

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 40, I think?

much like the one Ezekiel saw in his vision. And in the very center of the garden is “the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

The vision John gives us of the city of God is one of radical healing. Radical, not meaning “extreme” but “from the roots.” A wholesale transformation from the ground up that seeks healing not by just papering over problems or sweeping them aside or whitewashing them. But by getting down into their sources and root causes.

Last weekend’s shooting in Buffalo is instructive on this. The New Jerusalem of Revelation isn’t just the world as it is minus a mass shooting here and there. But exorcising the roots of evil in the first place. In this case, that evil is rooted very explicitly in racism. It’s rooted in our idolatrous attachment to guns that serve only to kill or threaten. It is rooted in this great replacement dreck that is, as you might guess, rooted in an antisemitic conspiracy theory. And all of this is rooted in history. To state the obvious, the whole reason we have historically Black neighborhoods like the one the shooting happened in is because it was redlined into existence.<sup>2</sup>

So by the time you get to the mass shooting, you’re really just talking about the poison fruit. The vision of Revelation is that salvation goes deeper than just the stuff we see above the surface. And that redemption means getting down to the roots. That’s what’s “radical” about it.

And God’s final goal—God’s dream if you like that phrase—is healing. When the author of Revelation talks about the healing of the city of God, it’s contrasted with the magic “pharmakeia” of Babylon. Babylon gives you a cortisone shot that numbs the pain. It says, “Don’t worry about it. Shootings happen. Never going to stop them all. Prejudice exists. Can’t change people’s hearts. Histories of oppression are bad. But you don’t need to worry about it.”

But God brings about healing, “therapeia,” that restores us to life. Is healing difficult? You bet. It’s not pleasant at first. If you’ve ever done physical therapy for an injury or even just put rubbing alcohol on a cut so it doesn’t get infected, you know it doesn’t always feel great at first. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable. Sometimes it’s just not what you want to be doing. But it’s the only way to be restored to health. God doesn’t promise us magic that gets rid of our problems. God promises us that there is always the potential for healing, even when it gets difficult. And that sometimes healing means putting aside our own comfort.

This radical healing stuff isn’t entirely theoretical. Last Sunday, I happened to catch part of the Kelly Corrigan show on PBS.<sup>3</sup> And she was talking to Greg Boyle, a Catholic priest who does ministry with former gang members. And Boyle was talking about the narrative he was taught that there were bad people in the world. And bad

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<sup>2</sup> “How Racial Discrimination Hobbled Black Homeownership in Buffalo,” accessed May 17, 2022, <https://www.wkbw.com/news/national/two-americas/redlining-how-racial-discrimination-hobbled-black-homeownership-in-buffalo>.

<sup>3</sup> *Father Greg Boyle | Tell Me More with Kelly Corrigan*, accessed May 17, 2022, <https://www.thirteen.org/programs/tell-me-more-with-kelly-corrigan/father-greg-boyle-q1ttg1/>.

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people need to be taken out of society and put away. But then he started learning more about their lives and the communities they grew up in. And he started seeing the wounds these people carried with them. That by the time they're committing some act of violence, there's all this other hurt that's already happened. And so the animating question for him, in his words, is, "What if, instead of punishing [our] wounds, we sought to heal them?"

Well, the world would look a little bit more like the New Jerusalem. A place where God's loving kindness is abundantly present. A community where the walls we build to separate ourselves from others have been turned into tables where we gather as friends. A space where the gates to the city are never closed off to anyone.

And here's the final thought. One of the mistakes people make when they read Revelation is that they assume it's about some event that's going to happen off in the future somewhere. But remember that we're hearing this during the Easter season. And because Jesus has risen from death, that time is now. This vision that John gives us is a vision of what God is doing among us now.

After all, John tells us, God heals creation from the inside out. God acts in and through the life of Jesus, of course, but also through the ministry of all God's people. Through our baptism, God plants us by the water of life and God grafts us into that tree with healing for all the nations of the world.

Christ is risen, the root of death has been ripped out. The tree of the cross has become the tree of life. And God's radical healing has begun.

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