

Sermon for Sunday, May 15, 2022
Fifth Sunday of Easter
“When God Comes Down”
Rev. Dr. Rolf Svanoe
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

Revelation 21:1-8

“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, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And 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.’ 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.’ 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’”.

A terrible thing happened. Paradise burned. Paradise, California, that is. Four years ago, the Camp Fire was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California’s history. 85 people died and over 95% of the city’s structures were burned. In the 2010 Census, Paradise had over 26,000 people, over three times larger than Decorah.

I thought of this story as I was thinking about our reading from Revelation which contains a vision of paradise. We often think of Paradise as a place we go when we die. And it certainly is that. The Apostle Paul said that when he died, he would be with the Lord. Jesus said that he was going to prepare a place for us and that we would be with him. But the prophet John has a different focus here. John’s focus is on this world. We don’t go up to heaven. Heaven comes down to this world and makes it new. **“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. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.’”** God comes down to dwell with humankind on earth. The Gospel of John tells us that **“the Word became flesh and lived (dwelt) among us”** (John 1:14). God has come down to us in Jesus Christ to free us from our sins. That’s what grace is. God comes down to us. That is so different from much of religion where we think we have to climb up to God by our good deeds. But that’s not what we learn from Jesus. We don’t go up to God; God comes down to us in the midst of our pain and brokenness, in the midst of the mess we have made of our lives and world. God comes down to us announcing forgiveness through Jesus Christ. That is grace, something we don’t deserve or earn, but something God gives us in Christ because God so loved the world. God comes down and makes this old world new. That is what John wants us to know. Paradise isn’t somewhere up there. Paradise comes down to this earth and makes it new.

One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Field of Dreams*. We all know the famous quote from the movie. A baseball player emerges from the cornfield and asks the question, “Is this heaven?” The answer is, “No, it’s Iowa.” That has come to mean more to me now that we actually live in

Iowa. Iowa is a field of dreams. We all have hopes and dreams for peace and prosperity. “Is this heaven?” Obviously, that baseball player’s idea of heaven was a place where he could play the game he loved so much. That field of dreams, that little slice of heaven, is a place where we belong, a place we call home. It is a place where we feel loved and safe, where we can develop the gifts God has given us. Isn’t that what God wants us to experience now, on earth as it is in heaven?

There’s something else John wants us to know about heaven. John describes heaven as a city. There may be a garden in the midst of it, but heaven is a city. Heaven is not just me and Jesus walking together in the garden. Heaven is me and Jesus and a whole bunch of other people of every race and nation. It is a place where people live together, where they get along with each other, where they love and care for each other. It is a city where we experience God’s presence and blessing in community with others.

Sometimes when you hear people talking about Bible prophecy, they talk about the destruction of the earth in a final battle, Armageddon. But that is not the image we are given in Revelation. Instead of an apocalyptic end of the world, God comes down to renew the world. John reminds us that **“The one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”** God did not say, “I am making all new things.” God is not going to destroy everything and start over again. God did that once with Noah and promised never to do it again. No, God is making all things new. God is going to take this old, broken world and renew it.

New Testament scholar, Barb Rossing, writes that books like Revelation “take us on a journey into the heart of God’s vision for our world. Apocalypses pull back a curtain so people can see the world more deeply—both the beauty of creation and also the pathologies of empire ... In a time of climate injustice, greed, food insecurity, environmental racism, species extinctions, ocean acidification, and ecological trauma, the visionary world of apocalypses can renew our hope. They can help us see both the perils we face and the urgency of God’s promised future, turning the world for justice and healing ...”

The book of Revelation does not present for us a rapture, an escape from this world. Rather it gives us an earth-centered vision of God coming to renew this earth. God is not going to destroy this world. God comes down to this world to renew it. And that is not just a hope for a distant future. God comes down to us today. God comes down to us as we follow the Lamb and rely on Lamb power to change our world. God comes down to us whenever the Good News is proclaimed. God comes down in the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. God comes down when people feel sorrow and regret for their failures. God comes down when we learn to forgive and when enemies are reconciled to each other. God comes down when we feel anger at injustice in the world and work for peace and justice. God comes down when warring nations learn to live together in peace and share the resources God has given them. God comes down when we learn to love our neighbor who is different from us. God comes down and gives us a glimpse of the beloved community God wants all people to experience.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, a vision of the beloved community that God brings down to our world. That dream still inspires us today. I get inspired every time I hear his “I Have a Dream” speech, because I know that Dr. King was giving voice to the same hopes and dreams that the prophet John was describing. God is calling us to live our lives by that dream, the vision of heaven coming down to earth to make all things new. God is calling us today to follow the

Lamb and rely on Lamb power to make that newness a reality.

You high school and college graduates, these are the hopes and dreams we all share with you today: That you can live in a world where you are free to develop your God-given gifts, to pursue your dreams, and that issues like race, gender, age or sexual orientation will not be obstacles for you.

The fires that burned Paradise are gone. The city is being rebuilt. In the aftermath of a fire, in the midst of the ashes, new life springs forth. Haven't you seen it in the ditches along the highway when the grass and the weeds are burned? The next Spring, new life comes forth. God comes down and out of the ashes makes everything new. That is what God has promised. **"Behold, I am making all things new."** God can do that in Paradise. God can do that in Decorah. God can do that in your heart and in mine.