

The Biblical Story

Revelation 22: 6-10, 16-21

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 15) 2021

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“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” is how it all starts. God speaks, creation happens. God speaks, life begins. God speaks, and cosmos comes from chaos. And God looked on what God created, blessed it, and called it good. Creation is the good act of a good God. Not random. Not an accident.

There is no war in heaven. No violence. It’s the Word. God speaks. Communication implying relationship – from the Beginning.

Furthermore, it is creation with us in mind. We are created and have a place, a good place, in God’s Garden, where we do good and fulfilling work and raise kids and have a home and where we know God in intimate relationship. We are responsible for God’s good creation. We are to take care of it.

Then comes Sin. What is called the Fall. The Fall from God’s grace. The Fall from good relationship with God, from one another and from Creation. We become abstracted, isolated, privatized. The old, old story says that we were not content with our place and our communion so, in hubris, in prideful assertion, decided that we wanted to be something more than we were. We did not like our limits. So we sinned against God and all God had for us.

Instead of the *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace, harmony, wholeness,

connection, instead of the shalom of the Garden, we ended up with death, war, discord, division, distrust, disease, anxiety, estrangement, and segregation. Cosmos started turning back into chaos. Everything is fragmented, torn apart, disconnected from its source. We become distrustful of God, of each other, and others.

But God did not give up on us. God is faithful even when we are not. In God's *hesed*, God's steadfast, never-giving-up-no-matter-what love God decided that somehow there would be a way of reconciliation and hope and wholeness for this world and for us. There would be a way out of no way.

So God made a covenant. A covenant with Adam and Eve and then a covenant with Noah, marked by a rainbow, to end human bloodshed (Gen. 9:8-17). God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, "I will be your God if you will be my people." And God promised that through their descendants all the people of the earth and all of creation would be blessed and made whole again.

Even when God's people found themselves enslaved in Egypt, God did not forget God's covenant. God never wills for people to be in bondage, never wants people to be oppressed, never wills that people live a slow dying, and so God liberated God's people from slavery and led them to a new future and a new, promised way of living.

God's love and covenant of commitment was shown by giving us Torah, the law, the Way, which shows us how to live and worship God and live together in wholeness and hope. But it was not long before we decided that we did not want these Commandments so we trivialized them, or remade them into a prison, or

domesticated them, or ignored them.

We decided that we wanted to be like everyone else. We wanted a king like all the other nations. We were not content to have only God as our king. So God granted our wish and gave us what we wanted. And God said if these rulers will rule with justice and mercy, of worshiping me and caring for the least of our sisters and brothers, then they will be blessed. But if you turn to other gods and do not care for those who are hungry and poor and without power, then you will self-destruct.

Over time, God sent prophets to remind us of our covenant with God and with God's creation. Prophets sent to revive us and recall us to be who we are, who we are supposed to be, in God. But we turned our backs on God's messengers and self-destructed. We ran the messengers off, killed them, and, once again, we ruined what God had given us.

We were taken into exile. Defeated, stripped of all our pretensions and power and visions of glory, and we were sent into exile in Babylon. In exile we learn to wait, we learn to be silent and to listen, and to hope even when we saw no direct reason to hope.

And God's Spirit moved, the same Spirit that moved across the face of the deep in Creation. And God spoke. God's Word. But this time, "the Word came and lived among us." God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Messiah, the Promised One. Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us who God is and what God wants. If we wonder how God looks, we look at Jesus. If we wonder what God's plan is for this

world, we look and listen to Jesus. If we wonder how being human looks, we look at Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we read and hear the teaching and preaching of Jesus. He announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, the reign of God's shalom. In Jesus, the shalom of God began to break into, intervene, intrude into this old world of sin and death. And Jesus called us to join him in this Way of shalom, the Way of God. Jesus healed, and loved people, even those considered outsiders and outcasts. He forgave, even his enemies. He embodied God's hesed, God's faithful loving-kindness. He embraced instead of excluding. He incarnated God's reconciliation of all that is fragmented and disconnected.

But in a world based upon falsehood instead of truth, violence instead of forgiveness, and coercive power instead of servanthood, you can't have someone living the Way of truth, forgiveness, and service to God. So the Principalities and Powers of Sin and Death, and all of us who are still enthralled to the Powers of this old world, took Jesus and lynched him on a cross. We crucified the only Son of God.

Three days went by. Three days of darkness, three days of death, three days of despair. Then came Easter morning, when God raised Jesus from the dead. God said my truth is victorious over falsehood, forgiveness holds sway over violence, and suffering servanthood over coercive power. The Way of God and God's shalom reigns over the way of Death. In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is victory over the Powers of Sin and Death.

In God's hesed, God does not give up. The New Testament writers call it grace. The love that will not let go, that will not be stopped, that comes to us

freely. Grace.

The God who did not abandon us on the cross as we abandoned him, sent the Holy Spirit upon us to create and empower us as a new people. On Pentecost Day, the Spirit of the living and resurrected Jesus Christ blew through our lives and created one new people, reconciled and whole, out of many peoples. We call it the church.

The church, empowered by the Spirit, becomes the body of Jesus Christ. A people, a community of grace and peace and forgiveness and love, called to boldly tell and show the good news of Christ that God has not given up on this old world and God has another Way – to heal and reconcile in this broken world. Empowered by the Spirit, the body of Christ embraces all of us who have been left-out, ground-down, displaced, and diminished. God’s good grace invites us in.

And even though we are imperfect people. Even though there is still war and poverty and hatred, we know that it will not always be so. We know the End of the story. Someday the victory of God will be complete, and the Powers of Darkness and Death will be defeated – by the Lamb of God. Jesus Christ, the Lamb’s death on the Cross seals the fate of the Powers of Sin. God wins by suffering servanthood. God’s victory is by giving up his life and forgiveness. And the End of the story says that there will another Advent, where Christ comes in shining, triumphant love to judge the living and the dead. The One coming to judge is the same as the One who died for us.

The End of the Story tells us that someday there shall be a new heaven and a

new earth, a new garden – the final consummation is not that we get to heaven; it is that heaven comes to earth, where we will live with God and each other and all of God’s good, redeemed and made-new Creation in wholeness and intimacy. Now we see through a glass darkly, then we will see face-to-face, and we shall understand, finally understand it by and by. And there in fellowship with God, we will gather around the Table for the Supper of the Lamb, the feast of God, forever.

This is the story of Bible, the biblical world. The story of God’s salvation. This is the story, a world we are invited to enter. But upon entering we discover that our story can become part of this old, old story. Our lives become caught up in God’s story, in something bigger than we are.

Sunday after Sunday, Bible study after Bible study, worship service after worship service, we enter some part of this old, old story. What happens, what we pray will happen, is that over time, we find our lives in this world, this biblical world and when we re-enter our Monday through Saturday worlds, we look at everything through the lens of the biblical story.

Usually, the opposite happens. Most of the time, even the most well-meaning of us comes to church and/or opens our Bible and reads and hears it through the filter, the lens of our modern, everyday world. We see how odd things are in the Bible. How can people live so many years like they did in the Old Testament? How can God create the heavens and the earth in six days and then rest a day? What did Jesus mean by forgiving seven times seven? How did these things happen? Our standard is what we know as the facts of our living. These are our standards, and our challenge is to fit the Bible into these standards. And you know

what? The Bible does not fit. It does not make sense.

What we are about here at Austin Heights is to turn all of that around. What we want is for us to become enculturated into the biblical world so much that we no longer fit very well in this old world of distrust and violence. I'll be honest; I'm not particularly worried over the debates and discussions on how the early Old Testament people lived so long or were the seven days of Creation really seven, twenty-four-hour days or not. But I am interested in us becoming the sort of people who look at our world today from the perspective of the Bible, so we learn to ask different questions. How odd that we are so eager to carry guns and be ready to kill. How strange that we want to talk about things that Jesus either never mentioned or barely mentioned and ignore what he does talk about. Why are we so distrustful of each other? Why are we destroying God's good Creation and the climate? Furthermore, what can we do about it? We want to become so much at home with the biblical world that we begin to realize that we don't fit into this one. As writer, Flannery O'Connor, put it, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."

Baptism is the entryway into this biblical world, this story. We have the story of our own life. We know that story and we tell it and retell it to ourselves from time to time. We know who our parents are and about our relationship with them, for good or bad. We know where we go to school and who our friends are and what we like about our friends. We know how we like to dress and what we like to do and where we like to go. We know our own heartaches and pain and disappointments as well as what makes us happy. We also know the stories we've been taught of Whiteness, and the redemptive power of violence, of capitalism, and

making money, and getting ahead. All of this and more is part of our own story.

Somewhere in that story we begin to wonder where God fits in. How can God help me make sense of my story, my life? How can God help me make it through the day? How can God help me when I'm sad and disappointed and can share joy with me when I'm happy? And slowly but surely we allow God a place in our story, our life. Slowly but surely, we look into the biblical story and see how it can help me live my story. And often, what happens is that we seek to be baptized. So God and God's people, the church, become an important part of my story.

All of this is well and good, but all of this is not the whole story.

We enter the waters of baptism, and we put away everything behind us. We come out of the waters of baptism into the new life in Christ and in Christ's body the church. And what happens is that instead of inviting Jesus Christ into our life, into our story, Jesus Christ invites us into his story. In baptism we enter into Christ, more than Christ entering into us. We become part of this bigger and deeper story. Our personal story is caught up into this story of salvation. We learn to see more clearly and truthfully. We learn that much of our own story is myth and needs to be changed. We learn about racism and greed, violence, nationalism, and exploitation. We wake up, learn to see, and how the Christ story shows us to live differently. How to embrace rather than exclude, how to show mercy rather than judgement, how to be patient rather than violent, and how to bless instead of curse.

We do not lose our identity in this older and bigger story. Indeed, we

discover who we truly are. In God's great story of salvation, we finally know who we have always meant to be. We discover in Christ's story that we all have a place, a good place, a safe place. And we discover that we're all in it together.

That's our story and we're sticking to it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.