

The Final Joy

Isaiah 2: 1-4; Rev. 21: 1-5a

A beginning word about our scripture readings for today. Many Sundays we follow the 3-year Common Lectionary used by many churches of most denominations. For each Sunday of the year there is an Old Testament, a Gospel and an Epistle lesson. Preaching the prescribed gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent is always a challenge. All three years they are about the Second Coming of Jesus and getting prepared for it.

Part of the reason for the difficulty is what many Christians and their preachers do with the Second Coming. It is full of warning, spiritual anxiety and fear:

You better watch out,

You better not cry,

You better not pout,

I'm telling you why,

Jesus Christ is coming to town!

Then it gets worse:

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good,
So be good for Jesus' sake!

I

Some love to promote Rapture theology with its “Left Behind” scenario for the end times. The theology of the so-called “Rapture” is a cut and paste job of scripture that promotes the idea of Jesus swooping down and meeting us true believers in mid-air and taking us to heaven, while most of the human race are left behind to endure suffering, death and destruction. Doesn't sound very Jesusy to me, but it's enormously popular.

Let me assure you today, however: When the Rapture comes, Grace Baptist will be fully staffed.

There was a Christian pop song in the 1980's played over Christian radio stations. It has a disco beat. Ready?

You got to get right
or get left.
Is the Lord coming back for you?
Wo-ah wo-ah wo-ah,

You got to get right
or get left.

Are you one of the chosen few?

Wo-ah wo-ah wo-ah

Merry Christmas everybody!

Why are so many Christians fascinated with such a grisly end-time scenario? Diana Butler Bass calls it “Rubber-necking the Apocalypse.”

II

In contrast, our theme for Advent this year is, The Advent of Joy. And the key verse is the angel’s message to the shepherds:

Be not afraid (That’s always God’s first word to us, not “Be very afraid!” but, “Be not afraid!”)

For behold, I bring you (yes *you*)

good tiding for great joy

which shall be to all people (all!).

For to you is born this day

in the city of David

a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

So, instead of the regular gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent, I chose a passage from Revelation, a glimpse of heaven and the world to come. It's about The Final Joy. The vision given to John is beautiful almost beyond words. It is, to use the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, "a glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of this world."

Then I saw a new heaven (John writes); for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

(In that time the sea was a place of monsters and the dark unknown.)

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Isn't this a beautiful picture of the world to come, like a wedding of God and us?

And, I heard a voice from the throne (John goes on) saying: "Behold the dwelling of God is with humankind. God will dwell with them and they shall be God's people.

This is like Jesus' first coming, Immanuel, God-with-us, God's word made flesh to dwell with us.

And God (the vision goes on),

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will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither sorrow nor crying, nor pain anymore, for these have all passed away.

III

And who will be with us there in this world? *All*, for the angel said, it is good news of great joy to *all* people. *All* is one of the great words of scripture. It is used over and over to speak of God's love and salvation of all.

Some Christians would prefer to talk about *some*, the few who will be saved—they are parsimonious with God's grace. But not God, nor Jesus, who went after and is forever going after every lost sheep, and opened heaven's gate to all. Ephesians lays it out:

For God his made known the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, to gather up (unite) all things in him (all!) things in heaven and everything on earth. (Ephesians 1: 9-10)

God's will, God's good pleasure is the reconciliation and completions of all things. God wants all at the family table.

The medieval mystic, St. Julian of Norwich lived her life in a small room build to the side of the church at Norwich. It was the time of the Black Plague,

with all its pain, sickness and death. She was given visions from God that she called "Showings". One of them was about the world to come:

All shall be well,
and all shall be well,
All manner of thing shall be well.

All! Joy beyond the walls of this world.

IV

Yet John's vision of the world to come is not meant for that world alone, but for the world we have been given today. And this is where the vision of the prophet Isaiah comes in, a this-worldly vision, the dream of God for us and for all:

The mountain of the Lord will rise up higher than all mountains. And all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And many peoples will go up and say, "Let us go to the Mountain of the Lord that God may instruct us and that we may walk in the paths of God."

Then, then, the vision says,

They will beat their swords into plow shares and spears into pruning hooks.

Farm equipment forged out of military equipment. Tanks into tractors. And what will we sing?

Gonna lay down my heavy load

down by the riverside

down by the riverside.

Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand

down by the riverside.

Ain't gonna study war no more

ain't gonna study war no more.

Gonna lay down my heavy load

down by the riverside.

If we go up to the Mount of the Lord we're going to learn the things that make for peace, to use Jesus' words, not the things that make for war. It's the practice of peace, not war.

Hate speech leads to hate action, but we can learn to disarm our words!

There was an old cartoon from the 1950s of a cocktail party. Everyone was holding a cocktail and their mouths were swords. That's political speech today, and culture war speech. Let's try a unilateral disarmament of our words.

Think of a world where Twitter had only love-speech, where hate-speech interested no one anymore. Where LGBTQ have become initials of endearment.

Where Baptist, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim are mere adjectives of the whole people of God.

We can help that happen here. “Do not be overcome with evil”, Paul wrote, but overcome evil with good. Evil is overcome by every daily, small act of love.

V

Let me plant one more thought. What if the Final Joy of the world to come is the Original Joy of the world from whence we have all come? We have come from the joy of heaven and are on our way toward that same heaven; our future home and our original home are one.

T.S. Eliot wrote

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

Is the Final Joy also a forgotten memory of our original joy? The story is told of a young boy whispering to his new-born sister, “Tell me what heaven is like. I’ve forgotten.”

When Jesus comes again we shall discover that we have seen him all along,
in every little and large joy of life.

May heaven's joy invade our lives today!

1. T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets* (N.Y.: A Harvest Book. Harcourt,
Inc., 1943), 59