**May 19, 2019**

**Revelation 21:1-8**

The book Revelation is part of a genre of literature called “apocalyptic” which literally translates as a revelation or unveiling. Stories within this genre “unveil” something about the end times. The books of Daniel and 2 Thessalonians contain other biblical examples. This genre is very popular in mainstream culture. Apocalyptic, utopian, and dystopian stories are best-selling novels, movies, and comics. They contain elements of science fiction and fantasy, romance and mystery. Some end with hope, while others are committed to doomsday. From the novel Fahrenheit 451 to the Hunger Games series to Mary Shelley’s Last Man and Michael Crighton’s works, these end-time stories aren’t just light reading. They have become classics, moving onto high school and book club reading lists. We have probably all read, watched, or heard one of these stories in the past year.

Most recently if you saw the newest Marvel movies about an alien monster who destroyed half of life on earth, or read a story about a plague virus that killed billions of people, you would not expect to find that apocalyptic story *actually happening* outside in the real world. You know that these stories are not literal prophecies or explanations; they are artistic inspirations. The stories may be dusted with touches of realism, but the creators are taking us on a trip into their imagination. The authors and directors have no more understanding of the future than the rest of us. We know this when we see a giant flying squid alien on the big screen. We remember this when we close the book and take a deep breath to calm our racing heartrates after a scary part of a book. But we often forget this when we read this genre in the Bible, especially when it comes to Revelation…

We (Presbyterian, theologically reformed Christians) do not believe that this book, Revelation, is nonfiction. This is not a literal telling of future events. We do not read each verse and chapter with the expectation that these things will literally be seen or happen the way they do in this book. But neither do we believe that this book is fiction. We believe the book of Revelation is divinely inspired; we believe that Revelation shares God’s voice with the world. We believe that this book (and the rest of the Bible) has as much to say to us today as it did with its original audience. It has a authority over our lives in a way that pop culture creations will never have. This book is part of the Word of God for the people of God…

… and yet, no one understands it. The context for Revelation is so far from our modern lives…

This book was written by a person who witnessed the oppression and persecution of the Jewish people. All of the trouble which threatened the Jews during Christ’s lifetime was coming home to roost. The Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ fears were being realized. Thirty years after Christ’s death, the First Jewish-Roman War resulted in the Temple’s destruction by occupying Roman troops. The Jewish people (and likely, early Christians) engaged in street warfare. Thousands of people were enslaved, exiled, or murdered.

Revelation was written after that first War. It was written when the people still feared for their lives. Their everyday existence was in question. So this Revelation was meant as a word of hope. This book promised mercy and peace for those greatly in need of such things. This book promised restoration and belonging for those who had lost everything and everyone. This book promised that the Roman Empire and its invading forces would not have the final word, but that God would establish God’s rightful rule and power. God would destroy all that was bad and evil and not of God’s own doing. God would set the world right, as it was always intended to be. People would be returned to daily living in God’s good garden (as it was in the beginning, and grew into a City here!).

These things are important to know as we spend the next few weeks in Revelation. Listen now for the Word of God to the people of God today. **Read Revelation 20:7-21:7**

This revelation shows human existence coming full circle. We end back at our scriptural beginning (with a few necessary adjustments). Whereas Genesis began with two people living in a sacred garden, sharing daily walks and talks with God, maintaining intimate community with one another and God…, evil interrupted, and more people were born, and chaos reigned. Death and destruction, sin and faithlessness played over the earth for generations upon generations. Until here, at Revelation’s end, God destroyed evil and sin and death and Hell. Now, as in the beginning, Goodness reigns supreme. God tamed creation into its rightful place. The bad parts were removed and destroyed. “Immanuel” – God with us – brought a new heaven down to be with us. “The home of God is among mortals.” No longer can people wander lost and think that God had forgotten them. No longer can people question if God heard their cries, or think that God didn’t care about them. Now God lives with people and intimately interacts with them as it should have been all along, in ways that we cannot deny. There are no distracting powers or personalities to interrupt their way of being. There is no place they can go away from God. There is *no reason* for them to go away from God (for evil and temptation were destroyed). There is only God and the people and life and love and joy.

This is a new day. It is a new creation. A new heaven and a new earth. Like the fresh moments after a heavy rainstorm. Like the laughter after a bone-wracking sob, here is a new way of being. It’s more than *hope*; this is reality. Things will be made new.

Although Revelation’s story has been hijacked, distorted, and manipulated by extremists and opportunists for both profit and ideological reasons, that is the antithesis of what Revelation espouses. If you don’t think HOPE! when you hear these verses, you’ve been duped. If you don’t think LIFE! when you hear this story, you’ve been misled. This book is the happy ending of a romance novel. This is when God sweeps us off our feet, the orchestra swells, and we find our happily ever after. This is when we are finally returned to our good and proper living with God.

These verses are often read at Christian funerals, a time when we are often lost in grief and tears. And while it is good to cry over the loss of someone we’ve loved, Revelation reminds us that death does not have the final word. “Death will be no more.” This is not The End of our life together. Christians can stand at the grave and laugh because we hear over and over again in scripture that God has not abandoned us to eternal doom or darkness or separation or nothingness. “Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” God is fast at work birthing a new creation. The new Jerusalem (as described here) will soon be our home, which *should* put things in perspective for us. We don’t need to worry about whatever trials and troubles – small or large – that come our way. We don’t need to be scared of evil or the devil. We don’t need to be scared of death. Our hope is in something bigger, something greater. Our faith is in God’s constant desire to be with us and save us and improve us.

For some Christians, these verses make people talk as though our time in these bodies and on this earth is wasted time and space. Some people act like all we need to do now is to get ourselves ready for the real production of eternal life in God’s kingdom (hence those old bumper stickers which read “Life is just the dress rehearsal.”) But that is not the theology of Revelation. That is not the theology of most of scripture. Our lives on earth are a gift. God Immanuel is present with us each day in the Holy Spirit. The resurrected Christ brought victory and good news eternal. And in these persons, with these persons, God has given us work to do to further the kingdom of God here and now. The trick for us in the here and now is not to just hide our heads in the sand until that day, or rest on our laurels letting God do all the heavy lifting. The trick for us today is to seek the Kingdom of God. Tirelessly. We must live and work as if we are already citizens in the New Jerusalem, flying God’s banner high. We must do justice and show mercy, doggedly acting into the truth that we proclaim: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. The tomb is empty. Death has no sting. It was and will be forever more destroyed. We are thus freed to speak out for peace and love and kindness, trusting that that is the ultimate Truth which God proclaims. We are thus freed to share all our resources with those in need, trusting that God will continue to care and provide for us. We are simply freed to be the good creatures God made us to be. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty, I give water as a gift from the spring of life. I will be their God, and they will be my children.” Amen and amen.