

Sermon Title: Why Wait?
Text: Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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When we lived in Milwaukee, one of the other parents at our daughters' school made his living as what he called a "futurist." Companies would apparently hire him to project the course of their business, taking into account changing trends in market, technology and manufacturing. He would write up sleek smart reports, and get paid for them. It still strikes me as odd that you could earn a living doing something like this, but I realized then, as I realize now, that one of the great obsessions of human living is that we long to know the future: what lies around the next corner; what our fortunes will bring. It begins in adolescence with a Ouija board perched precariously on our knees, but apparently is popular enough that I can think of at least three or four "psychics" within a ten minute drive from this sanctuary who, for a price, will tell you what is in store for you.

No surprise, then, that when we are confronted with images as odd as those that fill the last book of the New Testament, our reflex response is to imagine that in some way they are lifting that veil that separates us from the future, giving us a glimpse of what will be. For centuries folk have poured over these pages, and their odd images, in search of clues for how this world will end, what will become of our lives, and of all we hold dear. The *Left Behind* series is just the latest example of this continuing phenomenon in Christian thought: it seems a constituent part of our human being: we want to *know* the future.

It was Walter Bruggemann, an Old Testament scholar, who transformed my thinking about all this now almost thirty years ago. He wrote a thin little book by the title of *The Prophetic Imagination*. To understand what prophets, and prophetic literature, and apocalyptic are up to, he argued, you first have to wrestle it free of this caricature of "telling the future." Early on in the book, Bruggemann provides an alternative definition of the prophetic voice, and it has been a core of my own understanding not just of prophecy, but this Christian faith we hold. "The task of prophetic ministry," he wrote, "is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."¹ It's not a Ouija Board, or tea leaves, or tarot cards, or "futurists" that these strange texts are about. The question at the center of it all is not the *future*, but *now*: how can we, by the grace of God, allow a new way of being that in Bruggemann's words *criticizes* and *energizes* God's people to dream *this* world...not the next, as God is calling it into being. Revelation—this odd crush of images that closes out the New Testament canon, is about *thinking* differently, so that we can *be* different, as God's people in this world.

To understand it, you really do have to begin at the ending, as we did today. In a way, the first 20 chapters of Revelation are a clear-cut: trying to level the horizon so that you can see the truly radical newness John saw, not in a distant future, but right before him: a new heaven and a new earth, and the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. The rupture between heaven and earth, begun all the way back in Eden when Adam and Eve refused to accept their proper place in creation, is healed. The home of God is not in some far off heaven, cut off by flaming swords, but among us, mortals. And God's purpose in our midst is not the fire and

¹ Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978. P. 13.

brimstone that fill the first twenty chapters, but as one who dries all our tears, lifts the burden of death, soothes the mourning and pain, and quiets our crying. *This* is what God has in store for those who trust, and who follow in his ways.

But *we* read in the light of this season of Resurrection, and the thing I cannot get out of my mind is that what John saw was not far off in time. What we claim in the light of the empty tomb is that the power of death is *already* broken, and so with it the grip of sin and brokenness on this world. We can, even today, claim that promise which others would insist can come only as this world is destroyed. Why wait, when this amazing gift of God's gracious presence is available to us, not after rapture and war, raging horsemen and blaring trumpets, but in the voice that called to Mary from the garden. What did he say? "Woman, why are you weeping?" Let me dry your tears. Go, tell them all what you've seen, not languishing on a distant shore, but as near as your touch!

No, we will not, by any effort of our own, destroy the power of death, but I have seen enough times that I don't need to believe it anymore: when lived in the caring hands of this congregation, death's sting does not bite as hard as it might, and it most certainly does not win. I don't think we can count the tears that will be dried when the Partnership Apartments are completed, and families that had no place to go to escape from abuse have homes where they can piece their lives back together with dignity and care. The bags of food you bring faithfully each month; the boxes of school supplies, and quilts, and comforters, mittens and coats; the hives of bees and flocks of geese that have fanned out into the world from your goodness, each in their own small way, though not sufficient unto itself, shines the light, not of what may one day be, but of what *already is* God's saving and healing love for this world. It's not "by and by, pie in the sky when we die." It's a promise that is good for today.

And it is reinforced if you listen carefully to that little snip of the Gospel we shared. You have to understand the first phrase: "When he was gone..." "He" was Judas, and what he had gone to do was to turn Jesus over to the authorities who would crucify him. If there is a soundtrack it is the slow grinding wheels of death being turned into action. But Jesus does not say, "Just wait. A bad time is coming, but once this is all over, I'll come back and everything will be fine!" Jesus' response, as Judas disappears into the darkness is *immediate*: "*Now*" in this moment, "the Son of Man is glorified, and God has been glorified in him." Not tomorrow, when he stands at trial, not when he dies forsaken on the cross, not Sunday when he rises from the grave. *Now*. Right here in the heart of darkness, the glory of God is being revealed.

And then Jesus turned back to those who were left in that room, and for my money, spoke as important a word as he ever spoke to his followers, knowing full well that by cock's crow they would all be gone. "I give you a new commandment" he said. Put it right there beside not stealing or bearing false witness, and honoring your father and mother. "Love one another. Just as I have loved you"... "love one another." It's how they'll know you belong to me....not if you have a good imaginative tale to tell about the end of the world, not if you can claim special privilege in the life to come. They will know you belong to me because of the love you have for one another.

Love each other, not with the mushy sentimentalism that is sued these day to sell everything from beer to blue jeans, but that strong, supple kind of love I met first in my parents: a cold hard love like the steel of an anvil on which my life was shaped and molded to reflect the sometimes hard, but always bending love of God. It's the sort of love I learned early on with my own children sometimes has to say "no" even though everything in you wants to say "yes". It is a love that doesn't ask what you can do for me today, but how I can use my gifts, and abilities to shape this world in a way that truly honors and fosters life.

You know for over two years I've been plucking away at the question of how we're supposed to be the church in our little part of God's creation, for the moments entrusted to us. I don't think two years searching has turned up a better answer. The answer boils down to just what John saw in that heavenly city: how can we lift death's burden, dry the tears of this world, comfort its sorrow and share in its joy?

I know it begins right here, in the little things we do... which is why "friendship" must never be a "ritual" among us. It involves sharing together in this one bread and one cup. It demands that we grow together, and give freely of ourselves for each other, and that we constantly turn each other out into the world, because as clear as Jesus was that we lost love one another, he was just as clear that the neighbor we love is not just the one who looks and acts and thinks like us, but might even be the despised Samaritan.

Loving each other means not only opening our lives to each other, but committing to growth in our faith and understanding, from the youngest child in our midst to our most senior member—it means never being satisfied with yesterday's answer, but always seeking the fresh winds of God's Spirit today. It means letting today be the day when we join with John's vision, if not in its fulfillment, then at least in its inauguration, allowing God's spirit to use our hands, hearts, souls, and minds to build what we can only dimly see...that New Jerusalem, with God in our midst, and love as our only motive.

Let us pray.