

NOVEMBER 8, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – LOIS HARDER

Welcome! To each one of you, whether you're here, in person, or zooming in – in a moment we'll invite those of you zooming to turn on your cameras so we can greet one another. But wherever you are and whenever you're listening or watching, we welcome you and we acknowledge that it is GOOD to be together, to worship, to fellowship, to gather strength for our journey. OK... those who are on zoom from home, where are you?

This morning we'll wrap up our series on the strange and hopeful book of Revelation – as Pastor Caleb will preach from the final 2 chapters this morning. We hope that you've been able to learn some new things about this book and that you've been inspired and encouraged by it to cling to our faith in Jesus as we try to follow him in our lives.

We'll take a few moments now to share any opportunities for Celebration or Service:

- 1) Just a word about the upcoming GMA Community Thanksgiving meal. Like almost all the other fund-raising meals these days, this is a drive up and pick up your meals affair. It will still be at the elementary school but you'll simply drive up to the main door, let the person know how many meals you've reserved, wait for just a moment while your meals are brought to you and then take them home or wherever you plan to eat them. So... Keith Banman is catering the meal, no part of the meal is being donated this year, so we would ask you to consider that when you make your donation to the GMA. And we would also ask that you rsvp on-line at the url listed in your bulletin or, feel free to call the church office to let us know how many meals you'd like. That deadline is tomorrow. The meal will be served from 5-6 p.m.
- 2) Also... a reminder from the gifts facilitating group – a form was sent out by email (hard copies are also available) for you to give prayerful consideration of anyone you'd like to suggest who you think has the gifts and abilities to serve well in the various leadership positions in the church. These suggestions are due on Wednesday. That email was sent on Friday, October 30, if you want to go back and find it. The gifts facilitating committee very much values your thoughtful suggestions.
- 3) Finally, we are aware of the rising numbers of positive covid cases in our area. The Task Force will meet again tomorrow for further discussion and will keep you posted.

Let's join together now in reading our Call to Worship...

Leader: God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

People: We will be God's people and God himself will be with us and be our God!

Leader: Christ says, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

All: Come, Lord Jesus!

Invocation – You promised, Jesus, to be with us whenever 2 or more are gathered in your name. We are here. To worship, to be renewed, to be reminded that we are your people, the sheep of your pasture. We are here to seek and to feel your presence with us. Come, Lord Jesus. Be with us. Bless us. Challenge and comfort us. Reveal yourself to us and lead us in your ways. Amen. Our first congregational hymn is number 593, O Power of Love. I encourage you to take in the words, hum along, if you like, while Marcia plays it for us.

Laura will bring our Children's story this morning...

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Loving God, as you know, it's been quite a week in our country and around the world. As emotions and tensions ran high, we are grateful that there have not been responses of physical violence to the election. We know, God, that your will and your wish is for your children to live together, as we read in the book of the prophet Micah – everyone neath their vine and fig tree, in peace and unafraid. We continue to pray for that scenario to become reality here on earth, as it is in heaven.

We pray for those who are suffering in the wake of Hurricane Etta, especially those in Central America – in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. We ask for your Spirit to be present with those who've lost so much... homes, possessions, and for some, loved ones. May your Spirit of compassion and camaraderie win the day as people work together and help one another in the process of clean-up and rebuilding their lives, their homes and towns. May those of us who are in positions to help be moved to generosity and love.

We continue to pray and give thanks for those who live and work in long-term nursing facilities. Continue to be with them, God, as they battle isolation, boredom, depression or anger. Continue to grant patience and creativity to those who work and care for the residents. And grant patience and safety to the residents and the employees. Lord, continue to be with those on the front lines in hospitals and clinics. Give them perseverance and stamina as they suffer compassion fatigue and exhaustion. As a nation, give us the will to cooperate, to work together for the good of all, to care for one another with extraordinary love and goodwill – the sort of care that Jesus called on his followers to show.

God, we are grateful for reasons to celebrate – for the safe and happy arrival of Nolan Paul to Byrant and Chrystiana and Emmett and to grandparents Delton and Janice. Be with this family as they welcome this new member. We celebrate with Fern and Roger Bartel as their daughter Nicki begins her marriage to Kevin Nolasco. Bless them and the commitments they've made to one another.

Thank you, God, for students and teachers, administrators and support staff as they continue to do school in these strange and unpredictable times. Thank you for the athletes who've successfully finished their fall seasons and prepare to move into the next phase. Thank you for all aspects of our educational system – for music and art, for the opportunities to learn different subjects as well as how to get along with one another. We thank you, also, for our mid-week teachers and sponsors – for those who are teaching our children the stories of Jesus, the ways he lived his life and invited us to follow him. Continue to bless our learning and growth together in all its many forms.

And now bless the rest of this time of worship. Open our hearts to hear your message, to take it with us, to live it out and make it real in this world. Amen.

Our next song comes from the new, Voices Together book that will soon come out. It's a familiar Scottish tune, I think, but with new and beautiful words that reflect the words of Revelation that we'll be hearing shortly. So I encourage you to read and soak in the poetry as Marcia plays.

HEAVEN AND EARTH JOINED – CALEB YODER

Revelation 21:1-10, 22-27, 22:1-5

Since the last time we worshipped together, the US has had a general election, that's actually been called.

Some people are relieved, and others in dismay or questioning the results.

If we are clear-eyed, we have seen just how broken our nation is, and we'd know not to pin too much expectation on what the president can do.

It's not just our country, our world is profoundly broken. There are record-breaking case numbers both in the US and in Europe.

Tropical storm Eta smashed into Central America, and torrential rains have flooded the neighborhood where I lived.

I'm told that the water reached the second level of the church you see in the picture. People have lost everything. The Mencia family I lived with for 3 years spent a night in their car.

I want to share with you the first part of a song by Bryan Moyer Suderman, who was heard a couple of years ago for the joint WDC worship service at our church. Maybe you've heard it.

In just a few lines it sums up, what I'll have to say today.

There's a new world coming, it's already here.

There's a new world on its way.

There's a new world coming, it's already here.

Let's begin to live that way.

NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

In his final vision, John the Revelator begins, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth passed away."

In the biblical view of the world, "heaven and earth" were basically the way of saying "the world" or "the universe."

The earth was a slice of land surrounded by dangerous watery chaos. In Revelation, the sea is dangerous. The first beast came up out of the sea, and the dragon may well have been a sea monster.

“Heaven” referred both to the sky which literally gave breathing room from these waters collapsing in on the earth, and “heaven” also referred to the dwelling place of God somewhere above the earth.

In John’s vision, the world gets remade, and the new world won’t have a sea. It’s a world that will be safe. John describes a time when God will wipe away every tear – when there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain.

Let’s spend a few moments, trying to understand John’s vision.

If you are like me, you may wonder how you’d translate it into the framework of modern science. Would this “new creation” be a re-make of the entire universe of billions of galaxies, or just the earth? Would the laws of physics suddenly be different?

Those of us who are “science-y” might have to be willing to set that aside for a bit.

Let’s look at how John speaks in rich symbol doing his own rework of previous biblical tradition.

John spends the most time talking about the magnificent new Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is an important symbol to John, because the Jewish temple was located in Jerusalem and was like a divine embassy or enclave within our broken world.

The holy of holies of the Temple was the one physical space not somehow contaminated by human sin.

The guys from the website Bible Project describe new creation as heaven invading earth – the divine space and the human space once again overlap like they did in the Garden of Eden.

The image on the screen is taken from a video where these two separate spaces once again join thanks to the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross.

You may remember that the book of Revelation gives magnificent description of God’s throne attended by the 24 elders and four living creatures, multitudes of white-robed martyrs standing above a glassy sea.

Now that throne is essentially lowered from heaven to earth, God’s true dwelling is directly with people.

There is no need for a temple in the new city, because the entire place basically is a temple.

If this were a Sesame Street snippet, I’d have to say that Revelation 21 and 22 are sponsored by the number 12.

The city has 12 gates, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, with foundations named after the 12 apostles.

John describes the city as a perfect cube 12,000 stadia in each dimension – that would make it thousands of miles long, large enough to sit on top of the entire Roman Empire.

The perfect cube possibly connects to the fact that the most Holy space in Solomon's temple was a perfect cube.

John's vision draws a lot on earlier biblical imagination. Take for instance, Isaiah 65:17:

*"See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind."*

A lot of the details seem to come from the prophet Ezekiel, with significant changes.

In Ezekiel the city is a square also with 12 gates. Both Revelation and Ezekiel have a river of life, but Ezekiel has a temple, while Revelation does not. Ezekiel has trees on either side of the river, and Revelation reaches back to the Garden of Eden story to plant the tree of life.

John's vision is borne out of the previous conflict of the evil power of empire and Babylon. In contrast to the whore that sits on top of the beast, the New Jerusalem is the bride of the Lamb who was slain.

In contrast to those who had the mark of the Beast written on their foreheads, now everyone has the name of God written on their foreheads.

Entrance into the city is marked by non-violent resistance to the earlier regime. It's those who have washed their robes who may go through the gates into the city. It's those who "conquer." Remember that the word "conquer" has been given a special definition.

The Lamb "conquered" by giving his life, and Christ encouraged the seven churches to "conquer" "just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."

The quality that is needed is the same self-giving love that Jesus exemplified. This has been consistent throughout the book of Revelation.

Yet, salvation is also emphasized as a free gift, symbolized by the river of living water flowing from the throne that anyone may partake of.

The tree of life offers continual life, and its leaves give healing to the nations had previously been led astray by the Beast.

This isn't an all-inclusive vision. Because nothing "accursed" or "unclean" can be found in the city, those whose actions demonstrate they have rejected the kind of self-giving love of Jesus that makes this vision possible cannot be included.

The vision requires human transformation and allows human choice.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis plays out a thought experiment in which those who are in hell are given the opportunity to move to heaven, but ultimately prefer to remain in hell.

One memorable quote is: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"

In spite of this note of exclusion, there is plenty that is *inclusive* about the city.

The gates of an ancient city shut at night to protect those inside from invasion, yet there is no night in this new world, so the gates remain always open.

The kings of the earth now bring their glory into the city. This is remarkable because previously, these kings worshipped the beast, and were devoured by vultures.

Given the symbolic nature of Revelation, I wouldn't spend too much time trying to resolve apparent contradictions.

The point seems to be that God's intent is to truly redeem and include all the nations, not just a selective group. Even the servants of the Beast can repent and be transformed by the self-giving love of the Lamb.

There are surprises as to whom God's kingdom ultimately includes. God welcomes the gifts of all people, so long as ego and falsehood are stripped from the gifts we offer – which is the challenge.

IMAGINATION

I have two calls I encourage us to take up. The first call I want to make is to creatively imagine what God's New Creation is like.

Biblical authors from Isaiah and Micah to Ezekiel and John all model is an act of imagining the world to come. This imagination is full of symbol, brimming with life-sustaining hope, and based on faith in a loving God.

For example, Isaiah and Micah both imagine the time when the nations stream to the mountain of the Lord and beat their swords into plowshares.

And Isaiah 11 anticipates a time when the wolf will live with the lamb. There are many biblical examples of imagining the new world. If you take every passage literally, it's hard to get the details to match up.

When Isaiah imagines a "new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65), he still assumes that people eventually die, though at a ripe old age.

And Ezekiel spends lots of time on a giant temple that hasn't been built so far, and that isn't necessary anyway according to Revelation.

I'm not sure the point is to get all the details right. Maybe it's the imagination, and the meaning-making and the hope-building embedded in the imagining.

It's an act of faithfulness to the Bible to do our own imagining in light of our faith in our creator God and the self-giving love of Christ.

We have to exercise that imagination. You might journal or paint. Maybe spend time day-dreaming, writing a poem, a short story or a parable like Jesus did. The text that Adam Tice set to the Scottish folk tune we followed along with earlier is a good example of this creative work.

A song that comes to mind for me was composed by the Spanish song-writer Labordeta during the Franco regime. The chorus is: "*Habrá un día en que todos, al levantar la vista, veremos una tierra que ponga libertad.*"

There'll come a day, when we lift our gaze, we'll all see a land that makes for freedom.

One of the stanzas speaks to the tension of living between the present and the future hope:

*"También será posible que esa hermosa mañana
ni tú, ni yo, ni el otro la llegemos a ver
Pero habrá que forzarla para que pueda ser."*

It's even possible that neither you nor I or the other will arrive at seeing this beautiful morn. But we'll have to push to make room for it to be.

This resonates biblically, like Moses who didn't get to enter the promised land, or Abraham who died before he saw his descendants become a nation.

Engage in imagining what it's like when God's will is done on earth as in heaven. We can't live into something if we don't first dream.

BEGIN TO LIVE THAT WAY

The second encouragement I have, in the words of Bryan Moyer Suderman, is to "begin to live that way."

Biblical theology affirms that new creation is God's work. So, some Christians focus on being as righteous as they can in their personal lives until God whisks us away to heaven.

But I think that believing in new creation leads us to being *more invested* not *less invested* in our present world.

We need to get our hands dirty joining God in this work. There are solid biblical reasons to believe God receives our efforts, and that what we do matters.

J. Nelson Kraybill says it like this: "If we understand the arrival of the new Jerusalem to have started already in John's day, and to continue in our own, then the holy city is a symbol of God

restoring the world in the present. Someday, when Christ returns, the restoration will be complete.”¹

One commentator, John Yeatts draws attention to Paul’s teaching that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and should be cared for. This means there is a continuity between what we do with our material bodies and resurrection life.

Yeatts goes on to find a parallel in the area of creation care. The world is not disposable. Caring for creation is honoring God as creator.

If you follow the news in the area of climate change, we are not in a good situation. The topic of climate change and climate justice matters to me personally, both as a father of two young boys who inherit a world with a very uncertain future. Additionally, there’s my connections with more vulnerable folks in Latin America like the Mencía family that I lived with who have been flooded out of their home.

Followers of Jesus offer a reflection of God’s new creation within our broken world. We receive our light from the Lamb and pass on the light, offering a foretaste of what God’s new creation is like. We can’t find the inner strength to do this without hope in God’s new creation. And we can’t believe in God’s new creation without it impacting our investment in redeeming our present world.

John’s final vision in Revelation reveals God’s loving intent for a restored humanity and this vision provides hope to endure through struggle.

There’s a new world coming, and it’s already here. Let’s begin to live that way.

BENEDICTION

“Come! You who are thirst, and you who wish to take the free gift of the water of life! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all God’s people. Amen.

¹ Kraybill, J. Nelson. *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. Brazos: Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 176