

January 1st, 2017

Although many attribute the Book of Ecclesiastes to King Solomon, modern scholarship believes that it is more likely that this book was written by an individual who was high up in King Solomon's court. There is some thought that the book was actually written by a teacher in a school, who was setting his own view against the traditional wisdom of the time. The reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 is a poem that takes the form of 14 opposites, each introduced with the word "time." This readings tells us that although everything has its proper time, human beings, even astrologers cannot discover that moment.

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13

¹There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth:

²A right time for birth and another for death,

A right time to plant and another to reap,

³A right time to kill and another to heal,

A right time to destroy and another to construct,

⁴A right time to cry and another to laugh,

A right time to lament and another to cheer,

⁵A right time to make love and another to abstain,

A right time to embrace and another to part,

⁶A right time to search and another to count your losses,

A right time to hold on and another to let go,

⁷A right time to rip out and another to mend,

A right time to shut up and another to speak up,

⁸A right time to love and another to hate,

A right time to wage war and another to make peace.

⁹But in the end, does it really make a difference what anyone does? ¹⁰I've had a good look at what God has given us to do—busywork, mostly. ¹¹True, God made everything beautiful in itself and in its time—but he's left us in the dark, so we can never know what God is up to, whether he's coming or going. ¹²I've decided that there's nothing better to do than go ahead and have a good time and get the most we can out of life. ¹³That's it—eat, drink, and make the most of your job. It's God's gift.

The author of the Book of Revelations is stated to be John. This book was written close to the end of the first century and appears to be written to a number of communities of Christians who were being persecuted by Rome. The purpose of the book is to offer comfort and encouragement to these communities. John accomplishes this in two ways: first by revealing the blessed future state of Christians who are faithful to the testimony of Jesus even at the cost of their own lives, secondly by assuring the readers of the inevitable punishment faced by their persecutors. The reading from Revelations 21 speaks to the hope of the future, in that it speaks of the coming of new heaven and a new earth. All that once was has died away to be replaced by a time of God living with the people. It is but for people to remain faithful and they shall live in the glory of God.

Revelation 21: 1-6a

¹I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea.

²I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband.

³I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. ⁴He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” ⁵The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.”

⁶Then he said, “It’s happened. I’m A to Z. I’m the Beginning, I’m the Conclusion.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “It’s a new dawn. It’s a new day. It’s a new life.”

I am going to begin this morning by playing you two songs and see if you can recognize them. They actually speak to what our meditation is about this morning.

This is Michael Buble from 2005 singing “Feeling Good”

The second is Belinda Carlisle from 1987 singing “Heaven is a Place on Earth.”

How many of you have heard of the book or movie titled – “Left Behind”

This book is the first novel in a 17 book series that are best sellers written by Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The books deal with the end of the world from a particular Christian perspective.

This particular perspective is one that many of us have heard about and it consists of the idea of the “rapture.” Do we all know what the rapture is? That is the idea that in an instant all of the righteous people on earth will be transported and taken to heaven to be with God and the remaining people, the unrighteous will be left on earth to withstand a great number of trials and tribulations. The book series follows a pilot Rayford Steele, his daughter Chloe Steele, news reporter Buck Williams who are battling against the anti-Christ in Nicolae Carpathia. It seems that Rayford, Chloe, and Buck were not particularly righteous people and therefore were not part of the rapture and were therefore left behind. While Ray’s wife and son were righteous and so they were taken up to heaven in the rapture. I will have to admit here that I did read the books, and although I struggled with the theology I found them to be rather entertaining. These books contain what those in the theological world would call an eschatological perspective (and yes I even have learned how to spell eschatological). In other words it speaks of a way to understand what might be seen as the end times. In all honesty there are a number of Christians who understand this particular understanding of the end times, in that there will be the rapture and that they will be a part of this thing called the rapture, and it can impact the way one views the world and their faith.

For these Christians it really does not matter what happens here on earth because as long as they themselves live a righteous life they will find themselves at the end of time living with God in heaven. So global warming is not really seen as their problem because they will eventually be living with God. They see this idea of going to live with God as a way to get away from the problems of the world.

Greg Carey who is a Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster Pennsylvania states what this view of the end times looks like, “to provide pie in the sky salvation, an escape from the troubles and conflicts of the this world. According to this view, ..(end times) destroys the world we inhabit, along with most of the people who dwell in it, in order to deliver holy people to ‘heaven’ with its pearly gates and golden streets. Some Christians actually hope for this outcome.”

I know it seems rather depressing to be talking about all of this end times stuff on New Year’s Day and especially a week after Christmas, but it really is not. You see

as I stated this one view of how some Christians understand the end times, but then we have another view which is shown to us in our reading from Revelations this morning.

The Book of Revelation was written by John and it was nearly 2000 years ago when John received visions while on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. The Book of Revelation employs symbolism to expose the great power of its time: the Roman Empire. John's visions challenge the imperialistic view of the world suggesting that a lamb, rather than the emperor, is on the true throne of humanity. The Book of Revelations can be very difficult to interpret because it is so full of symbolism, it is not a Gospel or a letter, but it is rather what is called "apocalyptic literature." **Adam Copeland from Luther Seminary says that the Book of Revelation is, "across between John Stewart's Daily Show satire and a Stephen King novel."**

The reading from Revelation gives us a completely different view of the so called "end times" because it does not speak of the end of the world, but rather it speaks of the renewal of the world.

In Paul's vision found in Revelation speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, **"I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth,"** it does not speak that earth will cease to exist, but rather God will usher in a new world. Not only will the earth be renewed but God kingdom will exist on earth with us, **"Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. 'He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone."**

What does this have to do with New Year's and more importantly Christmas. Although many have already moved past Christmas, and are now solely focused on the New Year, in reality we are still in the season of Christmas and we would lose a whole lot if we don't recognize how Christmas might inform the coming of the new year. This is because all of this is part of God's process as God interacts with the world. You see if we were to ascribe to the idea of the rapture, to the idea that we are to reach those milestones that will allow us to be taken up to live in heaven with God, if we follow this idea then we miss all of what God has done in the world, and also the nature of all creation.

I have subscribed to a daily meditation written by Fr. Richard Rohr and this showed up in my inbox today speaking to who we are, and who we might want to be in the world today and it reflects strongly on this idea of what Christmas and the New Year might mean to us. Fr. Rohr began with a quote from Diana Butler Bass:

“What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God’s love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world.”

Rohr goes on to say, **“Our religion is not working well. Another year has ended—a new year begins—in which suffering, fear, violence, injustice, greed, and meaninglessness still abound. This is not even close to the reign of God that Jesus taught. And we must be frank: in their behavior and impact upon the world, Christians are not much different than other people.**

The majority of Christians are not highly transformed people, but tend to reflect their own culture more than they operate as any kind of leaven within it.”

This Advent we have talked about God’s relationship to God’s people, it is important for us to recognize and remember the entirety of God’s relationship with God’s people. On Christmas Day we read from the Gospel of John and how:

“¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people.”

Nothing came into being without God and what did come into being was life and this life was light to all the world. We also heard from the prophets and from John the Baptist, **“A voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”**

Again reminding us that we are to prepare the way of the Lord, not that we are to prepare to go live with the Lord. And this is what everything is all about. It was not about this idea of leaving the world behind. It is actually all about preparing the world for God. We are never meant to be just temporary residents or renters of this earth, rather we are to continue to live on this earth but in the presence of God. Christmas and then becomes another step along this process as God comes to live among us to show us what it truly means to prepare the way of the Lord. God comes among us in the baby Jesus so that we might truly see what it means to live God's kingdom in this world.

We see new years as the coming of a new year and the passing away of the old and this is exactly what the reading from the book of Revelation speaks about it speaks of the passing away of the old earth in the coming of the new earth. This is

also what Christmas is about as we are called to follow a baby to learn a new way to be in the world as we learn this new way we are called to let our old selves pass away and be reborn in the baby Christ Jesus. As we spent time in the next few days thinking about this New Year what will you allow to pass away so that you might be renewed and energized into bringing the kingdom of God to our world today? The work of Christmas, the work of God incarnate in the world does not end in the New Year but rather it continues through every day of our lives as we work towards the arrival of gods new kingdom on earth. To truly understand the reading from the book of Revelation, New Year's Day, and Christmas we are asked to live in hope of God coming to live among us, of God's kingdom here and now on earth. AMEN