

All Things New

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Texts: Revelation 21

Happy New Year, everyone.

So, what are you hoping for in the year to come?

What are you hoping for most deeply, with your truest heart? for yourself...? for our world...?

As a person of faith, what is your deepest longing?

During Advent, we reminded ourselves to take time for wonder, for gazing, for paying attention to God present with us in the midst of the here and now.

Christmas brought us the birth of a child, God with us face to face, in the turmoil and messiness of our human life. And now it's the new year, and what better time to think about the promises of God, not just for our own day and age, but for all of history? It's a part of our faith that we don't dwell on much in our corner of the theological tradition. We're very here-and-now, very focused on the needs and problems of the present day. I, for instance, spend most of my time thinking about whether I have enough casseroles lined up to feed a hundred people this coming Friday. (Answer: No. No, I do not.)

So maybe it's good to be reminded from time to time of the prophets and visionaries of our faith, the ones whose gaze is fixed on a wider horizon, and whose work is to help dream a new world into being.

The biblical story begins, you remember, with creation, and a garden. Along the way we hear of a people set apart by God, the family of Abraham. We hear of a holy city, Jerusalem; of kings and encroaching empires; of heartbreak, exile, and return. We hear of the birth of a child in a small town far from the centers of power, to a family descended from Abraham, of the lineage of King David—a child born to change the story forever. In him, the threads of the whole narrative are being drawn together.

Now, this morning, we're in the last pages of the Bible, with a vision that brings us full circle to where we began: a new creation, a new garden, and a shining new Jerusalem, where the faithful of ALL nations may safely dwell. In that new creation, there will be no more death, no more pain, no more weeping, no more oppression, but only gladness and freedom and peace in the presence of God.

"I saw no temple in the city," John says, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb."

Imagine it.... Can you?

We spend a lot of time at the end of every year looking back and remembering all the things that happened that year.

And sometimes we might look forward to the coming year and try to make some guesses about what's in store. Will Elon Musk step down as CEO of Twitter? Will Donald Trump get indicted? Will my next sermon be written for me by ChatGPT? That's a new artificial intelligence app, for those of you whose attention has been on other things. It writes a pretty good essay, apparently. You give it a prompt, like "Write a New Year's Day sermon on hope inspired by the 21st chapter of Revelation," and seconds later, boom, your work is done. That's the world we'll all be grappling with in 2023. Not something I could ever have imagined. Every new thing that comes along surprises me.

Meanwhile, we look at our bulletin covers and see a photo of the Carina Nebula, 8,500 impossibly vast light years away in space and time. As pastor Dan reminded us on Christmas Eve, the Webb telescope is enabling us to gaze deep into the past, to the earliest origins of the universe. Amazing.

If only it could look forward as well as back! If only it could peer as deeply into the other end of time, into the future... and tell us not to worry, that everything is going to be all right in the end.

But there's no telescope for the world that God is bringing to birth. To envision that world calls for a different kind of seeing, and a completely different kind of hope.

I think that's why I wanted to preach on the new heaven and new earth on this New Year's Day 2023—as a challenge to myself. Because I'll be honest with you all: I find it difficult to muster that kind of hope.

Climate change scares the life out of me, and the thought of what it's doing to the planet and earth's creatures makes me sad almost to the point of paralysis.

Politics fills me with feelings of helpless dread. How in the world did our country get here? Can we ever come back together around a shared reality, or is it simply too late for that? The war in Ukraine, the immigration crisis, the rise of homelessness and the opioid epidemic... It all feels so huge, so intractable, as if this is the way things will always be.

And I ask myself: As a person of faith, can I find a hope large enough, expansive enough, faithful enough to stand up to these painful world realities? Can I bring myself to believe that even these things shall ultimately pass away in God's time, that another world is still possible?

Which brings us back to John of Patmos and the book of Revelation.

John was a Christian living in the late-first-century Roman empire. Exiled to the Aegean island of Patmos during an outbreak of persecution against Jews and Christians, he recorded a series of visions about the final end of history. It's vivid reading, full of monsters and calamities and all kinds of cosmic drama. The armies of God take on the armies of Satan once and for all. The empire is overthrown, and with it, everyone who worshiped at the altar of Roman power and domination. At last, a new age dawns—and not just a new age, but a new creation, set free from evil and affliction: a world where God can dwell with God's people in peace.

“See, the home of God is among mortals. The Most High will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be present with them; the Holy One will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

Some Christians have treated the book of Revelation as a book of prophecy, a literal road map of things to come. Myself, I prefer to think of it as a work of fierce imagination and radiant vision. In its strangeness and wild imagery, it invites us to see through the curtain of history to the work and purposes of a God whose intention for us is salvation and whose will is justice. We are not simply at the mercy of the powers of this world, the angel reminds John in his island exile. We are

a part of God's vast, unfolding story, and that story is good, and trustworthy, and true.

Here in our little corner of Cambridge, we like to keep our feet firmly on the ground. But an important dimension of the Christian life is to trust in what we can't fully see, can't even really imagine. Through prayer, we hold our hearts open to God's work in us and through us, even as we grapple with the realities and challenges that continue to confront us.

The new age is yet to come, but we are already participating in it.

The new world is being born, but the old has not yet passed away. We wait with hope for the reign of God's justice and mercy—and we practice and pray to become people of justice and mercy ourselves—just as Dr. King spoke about the coming “bright day of justice” while organizing and marching and writing and speaking and facing down the empire of his day. The new age is a distant dream. But we are already beginning to live in it.

Can I learn to believe in that hope more than I believe the sinking feeling in my gut when I open my morning newspaper?

Hope is a radical orientation to hold in the world. It calls us to look to God with a trust that transcends our anger and sadness that the world is the way it is. Surely it helps from time to time to lift our eyes to that farther horizon, and to take as deep a gaze into the future as the Webb telescope is taking into the past. Just as Abraham dared to trust God to lead him to a land he had never seen, just as the people of Israel dared to trust God to guide them through the wilderness, as the magi dared to follow the star leading them to the Christmas child, as the disciples dared to leave their nets and follow Jesus—so we are invited to be on the journey toward a future we cannot yet see, and to begin living out that future by the power of the dream that has been entrusted to us.

A world with dreamers in it is a world that is already being changed.

So, what is your dream for 2023? What is your yearning for creation, and for history?

Streets of gold and walls studded with unpronounceable gemstones not resonating

with you? Then what IS your own heart's longing? What picture would YOU paint of wholeness and justice and joy for the earth? Whatever your vision, know that God is already there before you. Yes, she is with us, sharing and shaping the everyday circumstances of our lives. But God is also ahead of us, reaching out to us from a future that he already fully inhabits. Like the hands that reach for the baby taking his first steps, the arms held out to the new swimmer attempting her first strokes, the parent waiting at the end of the driveway as the child takes their first wobbly ride without training wheels, God is with us, and God is also ahead of us, encouraging us on.

And so, we gather on this New Year's Day, this second Sunday of Christmas, to break the bread of Christ's presence as travelers on the road, and to share the cup of the new covenant, his promise to all the earth. "See," cries the One who is seated on the throne, "Behold, I am making all things new." May it be so, today, tomorrow, and in the age to come. Amen.

