

SLD05.06.07 5th Easter
Revelation 21:1-6
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“A Divine Insistence”

Here we are today with another, more familiar text, of John's visions, one often read at funeral for its beauty, its intimacy, its hope and its tender reorientation from the grief of the moment to the healing of God's future. As we talked about last week, we can never say for sure the precise meaning of John's or anyone's visions. But we can open ourselves to experience and explore them for what they reveal to us about God. We can discern where the “life energy” that animated the vision also “quickens our own souls.” How God speaks to us through John's words, where they touch us, and inform our own lives.

Today's text offers a glimpse of the stunning vision God gave John of life after life, including life after death, of course, but also life after all the endings we endure before death. Today's text is about the power and the perseverance of a God who is always working beginnings beneath, through, and despite every kind of ending.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says God, “the beginning and the end,” and, we listeners might assume, everything in between.

Everything in between? Well, there's a struggle for another sermon - God's place or presence in evil, sin and tragedy. But we'll leave theodicy for another day. Today's text is about the trust, hope, and faith that God is ever and always working God's new beginnings whether or not we observe it, know it, feel it, or even believe it.

“See,” declares God, I am making all things new.” All the time.

You know that call and response “God is good!” “All the time!”

We used to say it at Central Church but I never much cared for it, myself. Kept wanting to stand up and tell my truth which is that, as far as I was concerned, sometimes God is good, but sometimes just okay, and sometimes, as far as I can see, pretty much useless. Like in the face of my or anybody's personal or corporate sin – war, meanness, laziness, greed - even just my personal compulsion to commit beyond my capacity to stay sane – on the face of it, I don't always see God as much help, do you? I mean, what is this happy "God is good all the time" stuff? Is everyone else's life that much different than mine?

But John's not presuming to pass comment on God's goodness or badness from humanity's perspective. What God reveals to John is how God operates in the world regardless of our perception, what God's up to whether it's apparent to us or not, how God is regardless of how we are, what God is doing in a situation however it strikes us. What God reveals to John is that behind, beneath, beyond whatever's going on in life, however hopeful or hopeless, however good or God-awful, God is making all things new, all the time.

And the God who is always making things new, reveals John, is not a God way up in heaven, wherever that is, or a deity hovering in some galaxy observing us "from a distance," as the song goes, periodically dipping into our lives with prayer-prompted interventions. The way God makes things new is by making God's home among us – among us: within us and in our midst. And not as some neutral transcendent feel-good presence but by dwelling in and among us as savior, lover, helper, friend. Says John, God chooses to make God's home among us, dwelling with us, claiming us as God's own, yearning for us to claim God as ours.

The God revealed in John's vision is imminent, invested, passionate, expectant. And from God's intimacy and passion comes God's hope for those whom God claims, the new Jerusalem, God's Kingdom on earth, hope and healing and holiness for all of life, adorned as a bride for her husband. Through God's investment and care and working all things new, whether we see it, or know it, or not, will come a time when death will be no more, until mourning and crying and pain will be no more, until all the first things have passed away and the goodness and wholeness and holiness of God's newness reigns throughout creation. This is John's revelation for us today.

And as we celebrate all the graduates in our midst, all the students who have worked so hard through the rigors of education who now face a new day in their lives, I pray it is a comfort to hear again of the power and sweep of God's divine intention to make all things new. Not just God's intention, but God's *insistence* on working God's newness into all creation, all the time, whether we're aware of it or not.

When students end one phase of their school career in order to enter another phase, perhaps of school, perhaps of work, perhaps of life itself, it can be such a monumental transition. And monumental transitions are invariably accompanied by upheaval, both inner and outer. Daily rhythms change, locations shift, relationships end. Certain opportunities open; others close. Maybe the school you want to go to accepts you, maybe it doesn't. Maybe you get the job you apply for, maybe you don't. Maybe the future unfolds easily and you're confident about next steps, or maybe you don't really have a clue *what's* coming next. Feelings can range from relief and joy to grieving, disappointment and regret. The release of the familiar combined with an

unclear future can be a volatile mix yielding as much fear as excitement. At the very least, everything's changing.

God's word for you is that in this very moment and always, God is working in you, with you, and through you, making things new, all the time.

But what if you're *not* a student graduating, and of course, most of us aren't. What if you're really *not* anticipating any big changes in your life but wish you were. In fact, what if you're longing for some kind of shift that will get you out of the same old destructive patterns and relationships and burdens from which you, yourself, can actually imagine no escape. Maybe it's been a long time since you gave up even imagining.

God has the same word for you:

"See, I am making all things new."

"Write that down," God tells John. "Put it in black and white and record it for posterity because these words are trustworthy and true. But you people (I imagine God borrowing Stewart's phrase) you people tend to forget them and imagine the only power operating in your life is your own. That's the way you people are," says God. "That's how hard life is. But I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One to whom belong the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, the beginning and the end. And see, I am making all things new."

In his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau tells an oft-repeated story in his New England community of "a strong and beautiful bug that comes out of the dry leaf of an old table of appletree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts, - from an egg deposited in the living tree

many years earlier still.” For weeks prior, the bug was heard gnawing its way out of the wood, hatched perchance by the heat of a cooking pot randomly set on the table.

Asks Thoreau, “who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in a dead dry life...may yet unexpectedly come forth...to enjoy its perfect summer at last! ...There is more day to dawn,” says Thoreau...though only that day dawns to which we are awake.”¹

Believe it or not, see it or not, know it or not, God is making all things new, all the time.

This is John’s revelation to us today, and his words are trustworthy and true

To the glory of God. Amen.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, an excerpt from Walden, found in Good Poems by Garrison Keillor, Penguin Books, London, 2002, pp. 424-423.