

**SLD10.07.07 World Communion**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Revelation 22: 1-7**  
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### **“Changing the Subject”**

This morning’s passage from the last chapter of the last book of the Bible – Revelation – is exactly that – a revelation. A dream. A vision. A sort of “out of mind” thought-picture hailing from “someplace else,” and lodging itself in the consciousness of a receptive believer, who then, time and trust permitting, attaches enough words to it to convey its message to others.

You can see why revelations are often difficult to grasp in any rational, linear sort of way. They don’t come that way, and they don’t come out that way. Which is why, I suppose, John keeps feeling the need to repeat throughout his book of revelations, in case anybody might be wondering, that his words are trustworthy and true, that no one should add or subtract from them, that whoever wants to benefit from his revelations ought to just take them as they come, and regard them as a gift. (Rev. 22:6, 22:18-19, 22:16)

So that’s what we’ll aim to do this morning – take John’s revelation as it comes and regard it as a gift; maybe even respond to it with a gift in return.

Hear these word from Revelation 22, verse 1 – 7.

#### **Revelation 22:1-7**

It’s a beautiful scene John sketches for us, isn’t it? A rich tableau of extravagant, even mythic, proportion featuring angels, golden thrones, crystalline waters and other grand symbolic expressions of abundance, hope, reconciliation, and “peace on earth.”

Anchored both by symbols of heavenly glory like angels and thrones, and the best of Creation itself – rivers, trees, fruit and leaves – in John’s vision, heaven and earth meet, just as they do in Jesus Christ. The crystalline river of Life flows through city, yet its source is the heart of God. The Tree of Life that straddles the river is that same tree we lost in Paradise. Fruit hangs on the tree, twelve kinds of fruit, but the kind of fruit, as I imagine it, essential to human flourishing, such as love, compassion, justice, wisdom, healing, peace, forgiveness, salvation, rest, hope, abundance, joy.

In addition to the fruit, the Tree has leaves all over it – ours doesn’t yet – you’ll put them there. Because in John’s vision as I imagine it, there are lots of leaves, full of life, all “atwitter,” the way Bonneau used to describe Beverly when she first fell in love with George. In my mind, the leaves of the Tree of Life are all “atwitter,” like the clapping leaves of an aspen, or a Chinese elm. All “atwitter” with life and hope and possibility, and with power, great power beyond all imagining. For the leaves of the Tree of Life, says John, are for the healing of the nations. The leaves of the Tree are for reconciliation of all conflicts, for the mending of all brokenness, the suspension of all judgment, the melding of all dualities. And those are some powerful leaves.

It’s a grand, a magnificent, vision John had – a vision revealing the beauty and power, the very nature, of Kingdom of God, both here and in the hereafter.

Unless you happened to dabble in acid during a foolish youth, who of us has experienced anything like this baroque, mind-bending, larger-than-life-at-least-as-we-know-it sort of revelation that the angel showed John that night on Patmos?

The closest I can come to imagining the awe John might have felt is from the experience of extraordinary natural beauty – standing before an ancient sequoia, or the

dome of El Capitán at Yosemite, the majestic twin peaks of the Grand Tetons, or perhaps glimpsing an elegant antlered elk, frozen on a distant cliff. Witnessing such grandeur defies words or photographs yet speaks volumes to the soul, to the psyche, to those clenched cells in all our bodies that vaguely recall “majestic” but simply haven’t experienced it in far too long. When we do, though, the experience reminds us how hungry we were for it, for somehow that grandeur feeds and nourishes and reorients us in a way that somehow changes everything.

Who knows what have been on your mind before you witnessed Old Faithful erupt, or laid your eyes on a 1,000 pound bull moose – the cost of the trip, the ache in your back, the right college for your kid, a conflict at work, property taxes, the annoying habit of a neighbor. But by the time you’ve hiked to the top of the Lower Falls at Yellowstone, and turn to look, well....

This is what a man named Nathaniel Langford wrote in 1870 of his visit to Inspiration Point:

" Standing there or rather lying there for greater safety, I thought how utterly impossible it would be to describe to another the sensations inspired by such a presence. As I took in the scene, I realized my own littleness, my helplessness, my dread exposure to destruction, my inability to cope with or even comprehend the mighty architecture of nature."

And here’s what young Justin Mattson from Wheaton, Chicago wrote from the same spot in 1998:

As I walked the 'P' trail, which connects the Canyon lodges to Grandview lookout, I had butterflies in my stomach as I turned to see the majesty of the Lower Falls once again. But then I heard its faint rumble as I turned a corner, and I was in ecstasy."

Awe. Humility. Ecstasy. A total reorientation of who one is, what others are, what life is, what God intends....

To be sure, whatever may have been on Mr. Langford's or Master Mattson's minds before they witnessed the unspeakable magnificence of those Falls, once riveted by the majesty before them, the subject was changed entirely to, as Mr. Langford remarks, "my own littleness...and my (complete) inability...to comprehend the mighty architecture of nature."

Let's listen again to John's vision of the Kingdom of God and see if we can't hold to a similar magnitude of reverence and awe . After all, who else is the Mighty Architect of Nature's Mighty Architecture but our Triune God? Not all of us have personally witnessed most extraordinary natural phenomenon but if you have, or if you can imagine the awe you'd feel before a 600-pound grizzly bear rising before you, or upon suddenly coming upon the vast vista of the Grand Canyon, or anything else that's bigger than you – a whole lot bigger, and more powerful; anything else that big and powerful and not remotely a function of you, or dependent on you, or an extension of your imagination, yet is *for* you, for your flourishing and your healing and your wholeness, something that perennially blesses you even without your understanding, then perhaps you can draw closer to the magnitude of reverence and reorientation evoked by John's revelation.

For if John's vision includes nature in its imagery and symbolism, yet its message expands far, far beyond merely discrete, created phenomena, to the very depth and breadth of relationship among all created beings, *reconciled* relationship – to the healing and calming and relaxing of all division, of all conflict, of all judgment, until all Creation and all created beings live together in peace.

Listen again:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. **John 22:1-5**

In John's vision, the nations and the people and all creation flourish in mutual forbearance and peace. And get to see God's face. Heretofore nobody gets to see God's face and live. (Ex. 33) Heck, the Israelites couldn't handle even the shine on Moses' *nose* when he came down from Sinai. But John sees everyone seeing God face-to-face, and living, all questions answered, all doubts resolved, in peace.

That's like a *thousand* Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyons and Glacier Parks all rolled into one, with a couple of blue whales thrown in for good measure! Even bigger! We can't even fathom how big that is!

Because if you and I can see God's face and live, that means we'll be one with God, in unity with God; that we'll share in God's being. It doesn't mean you and I will *be* God the way Jesus was – at least I don't think it does - but rather that the fullness of God will be in you and me the way the fullness of God was and is in Christ Jesus. That's the imminent transformation "soon to take place" John's talking about.

And if a 2,000 year delay casts a shadow over his word choice of "soon," maybe we'd do well to remember that God's Kingdom isn't just about the future but about right now as well. In fact, that's the whole point John sharing his vision. To give God's people a heads up about the extraordinary grandeur and majesty and hope of God's Kingdom so we could live out of it, and into it, and recognize it when we see it. So that we can *participate* in it.

This morning the way we'll participate in living out of the hope of God's Kingdom is by pretending that *we're* the leaves on the Tree of Life; that you and I are the leaves of the Tree of Life that God intends for the healing of Creation.

Don't try to figure out what that means. Just imagine yourself as a leaf on the Tree of Life and look in your heart and see what needs healing. The nations? This church? Someone we love? Our own hearts?

Then take one of the green leaves in front of you, and take a minute, and write or draw or represent in some way on the leaf what comes to you that needs healing. There are paper leaves around you, on the seats, in the back of pews.

We'll share a minute of silence – a whole minute – to consider the yearnings of our hearts, for ourselves, for those we love, for this church, for the world – and write or draw on a leaf something that expresses that prayer - just for you and God – nobody else gets to see it.

And then, in a few minutes we'll each of us come forward to the cross of Jesus Christ, the truest Tree of Life we know, and place our leaves on *that* tree, for Jesus to grow and nurture our prayers, and bring them to fruition.

Let us begin our moment of silence now, to discern what we will write or draw on our leaf of the Tree of Life. Then, when the hymn begins, please come forward to place your leaf on the cross.

Wait one minute.

We sing hymn and people come forward.

Conclusion:

The yearnings of our hearts give dimension and meaning and vitality to the leaves of the Tree of Life, while perhaps changing the subject of our lives from what we think we know, to what Jesus has in store for those who believe.

This is the gift of John's Revelation, and as he says, "blessed are those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book."

To the glory of God. Amen.

You are invited to come forward during the hymn to place your leaves on the cross.

***Ushers invite people forward to tack up leaves during the hymn.***