

The First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
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Sunday, July 15, 2012

We Climbed a Different Mountain
The Revelation of John 21:1-6

“How do we get there?” My oldest son and I were in Colorado fishing. As we paid for an assortment of trout flies, I asked the owner of the shop how to reach the S Curves, reputed to be a productive part of the river in the last few days. He gestured and said, “Over the mountain there. Down the other side the river runs fairly shallow, good for wading and the S Curves hold lots a’ fish. Pretty water, too. Real pretty water.”

We parked on the side of the road and started walking across a meadow covered with Columbines in full bloom; we walked on into the trees and up a game trail toward the summit. It took time. We crossed several small streams, climbed over and around deadfalls, skirted boulders larger than a house, and finally reached the summit. We rested a moment and had a drink of coffee. And then we started down toward the narrow river below. We emerged exhausted and sweaty from some brambles, slogged through a boggy area and paused on the bank to look at the stretch of water that curved in Ss before us.

As we to set up our fly rods and selected a couple of flies, I heard it: the sound of a car nearby. Then I heard another. We looked across the river and saw several cars parked and more arriving. Already, up and down the river, I could see anglers wading, casting into the riffles. I never imagined there was a road just down the highway from the trout store that crossed over the mountain, across a bridge and reached the other side of the river in twenty-five minutes. Roland and I had walked, crawled, and staggered most of the morning to get there.

As I started to gripe, Roland hushed me and said, “Dad, we climbed a different mountain. They are not even on the same river.” I think he was right. We were on a different river. We climbed a different mountain. The mountain and river were different for us than for the others who road over in cars. We had indeed climbed a different mountain.

If you look at the same old thing or person in a new way, is it the same old person or thing? I do not really think so. Sometimes – not all the time – but sometimes “perspective is reality.” Really.

A man named John, or someone from John’s worshipping community writing in John’s name, was exiled on the Island of Patmos, a small island 75 miles east of Ephesus. He wrote some 65 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. And he wrote to encourage churches to keep the faith as they suffered and were persecuted by the religious authorities and the government of Rome. He used imagery and metaphors familiar to his own time to convey the power and sovereignty of God in the midst of hard times. In an outburst of hope and faithful conviction, he wrote, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down

out of heaven from God... Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'Look, here God lives among human beings.'" (Revelation 21:1-3).

What do you think he saw? I think he saw the same old thing in an entirely new way. And, therefore, it was not the same old thing anymore. This same, tired, old world of ours is infused with God's world, impregnated with God's future, is in the process of being transformed, changed, by the pervasive presence of God's Spirit. God is making all things – all the same old things – new! And the kingdom of God's peacefulness is coming right here; here as a new earth restored and non-polluted.

Someone else might have looked and seen the same, tired old world which had always been there on the horizon. But John, sensitive to God's indwelling and aware of God's unique presence in Jesus Christ, is awake to the new thing God is doing in this old world. We are climbing a different mountain. Some who venture into the Revelation of John see beasts and demons, war and suffering, and the end of the world in doom and gloom. But the way we climb leads to comfort and reassurance that God, and God alone, is in control and working through humans to pursue God's compassionate and just purposes on this – this earth! We do not get to escape to heaven, in other words; we get to work with God's Spirit in the transformation of this world, this one, here and now! That is the grandest challenge of all, the noblest enterprise possible. To think that God entrusts that relationship to us; it is staggering.

God is not finished. God is not through with us yet. That is what John sees. That is what John's vision means. That is what the voice means. "Then the One on the throne spoke, 'Look, I am making the whole creation new...' Then he said to me, 'It has already happened'" (Revelation 21:5-6).

It has already happened, it is already happening, and – thank God – we did not have to do it on our own, or by our efforts alone. God is doing it through and with us, for the "dwelling of God is with us" John claims. You might call it "realized eschatology" or, better yet since God works with us, "participatory eschatology." We can, our imaginations captivated by Christ's gift of the new heaven and the new earth, see the same old thing in an entirely new way. As God works out the purposes of God's covenant with all of humankind, I deeply believe God fully intends and will bring all peoples into the new heaven and new earth.

Jesus comes to us, as the writer of church lyrics Brian A. Wren says, in many a guise – in many a disguise. Jesus the Christ may be walking the roads and the byways of life with those who follow Torah or Koran or other sacred writing. And God will use us, if we but allow it to happen, to point to the Christ climbing a different mountain with all peoples.

John depicts the new earth as infused by heaven. And only a truly sovereign God, God faithful to the promises that all will come to love and know God, could graciously lead us up the various trails to God's summit and rivers of grace. Only a truly sovereign God would allow us all to travel up the same mountain, though by many paths.

In this wonderful picture or vision of the new heaven immersed with the new earth, John boldly tells us what is not in our future. He tells us what not to anticipate. He lists what is not in our future. And it is wonderful! Wonderful!

There is no sea. The sea separated John from his homeland, from his loved ones. In God's abiding presence, there is no separation and no barriers dividing people; no walls in Jerusalem dividing Jew and Palestinian; no fences and walls along our borders dividing Mexico from the US. And there are no tears, pain or sorrow of rich separated from poor, gender distinctions and racial bias. For, finally, in Christ we really are all one! All that divides, all that walls us and others in or out, is eradicated and replaced with access to one another and to the God of all others.

Guess what else is not there in God's gift of a new earth and new heaven. There is no temple! No church buildings! No Mosque or synagogue, no Buddhist temple, Hindu shire, no Shiites or Sunnis. The days when religious crusades were tolerated are gone. God is not used to prop up governments or financial empires. Anything that harms God's creation or creatures is not tolerated.

Dr. Richard Selzer wrote a book of essays called *Mortal Lesson: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. He says,

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon has followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, in private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and his wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It's kind of cute."

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show that their kiss still works."

The kiss still works! That is what God is doing in our lives: God in Christ is accommodating to our condition to save us, to carry us over the mountain to the rivers of life on the other side. Can we not give our lives telling the world that the kiss still works?

What a grand day that will be! And it turns out we are all climbing the same mountain after all.

Amen.

