

## Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

### *The New Heaven and the New Earth*

**21** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

## Re-creation

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Revelation 21:1-6*

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” In a time when the earth is in ecological crisis this picture from Revelation is troubling. Comes a new heaven and a new earth, and in this future apocalyptic vision we read, “And the sea was no more,” Most of us can all too well imagine an ecological catastrophe in which the seas will be no more. The ice-floes melt, and the sea rises. But the temperatures continue to rise. And after aeons of violent storms, the water evaporates, and seas are no more. Or maybe it will go the other way. Maybe the great ice-ages will return, and the water will turn glacial, and the seas will in this way become no more.

You may recall that Robert Frost thought it could go either way, in his little poem, “Fire and Ice.”

*Some say the world will end in fire,*

*Some say in ice.*

*From what I've tasted of desire*

*I hold with those who favor fire.*

*But if it had to perish twice,*

*I think I know enough of hate*

*To say that for destruction ice*

*Is also great*

*And would suffice.<sup>1</sup>*

So, is this the picture from Revelation's fiery or frozen end, a picture of the cataclysmic extinction of the earth, the rapture, the time when God's chosen will be taken up to safety but the rest of us, as those popular books say, will be left behind? To be sure, the book of Revelation, with its strange creatures and vivid imagery has often been interpreted in such terms.

However, like so much of the Bible, it bears a closer look. Here we are at the very end of the Bible, the book of Revelation. To understand it, though, I think we need to circle back to the very beginning of the Bible and the book of Genesis.

The very first lines of the Bible reads, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>2</sup> The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The waters, the deep, the formless void, in ancient mythology they were the frightening form of chaos. Biblical interpreters universally recognize that the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis is the story of God involved in an epic battle with the deep, with the waters, with chaos. It has echoes of the Akkadian myth, the Enuma Elish, in which Marduk slays Tiamat, who is the sea, and creates the world out of her corpse. In ancient mythology the sea was fearsome, always threatening,

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<sup>1</sup>“Harper's Magazine,” December, 1920

something that had to be kept at bay, or better yet, defeated. The Israelites are saved and Pharaoh's army perishes in the Red Sea. Even though they are fishermen, the disciples are scared to death in the stormy sea. Jesus walks on water, above the chaos as it were. Peter almost walks on water, but succumbs to the chaos. Even in our own day, the all-too-frequent losses of fishermen at sea tell of the menacing personality of the great oceans. So, even while our contemporary understanding of the ecological balance of nature means that we may appreciate the sea more, throughout most of human history she has been the symbol of chaos and death even among those who have ventured out onto her in ships and boats.

To follow the mythological story a bit further, the fact of the matter is that after creation, after the epic battle, the sea's power for chaos remains, both in the Bible and in perfect storms of today. The Biblical scholar Jon Levenson, in a little book called, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, gives an account of Biblical creation that helps explain the continuation of chaos. As in other ancient myths, Levenson says, God did not create the universe out of nothing, but out of chaos, and, truth be told, the battle was fierce. And while chaos or evil was defeated, the victory was not permanent. Levenson helps us understand, then, the fact that evil continued in the universe. Evil keeps rearing its head and God keeps beating it back, sometimes more thoroughly than others. The ancient world view in the creation story makes prayer more important, for in prayer we are urging on God in the fight against chaos. We also have an active part, for we can help in the battle. Such horrifying events as the Holocaust, then, do not face us with a God who has abandoned us, but rather a God who was losing the struggle, who needs our urging in prayer and our assistance in the contention with evil. This is the human condition.

The vision of Revelation takes us to the next step. The real significance of Revelation's description of the new heaven and the new earth becomes apparent. That there is no sea is not an apocalyptic nightmare. Neither is it an ecological prediction of disaster. It is a description of a new creation that is utterly absent of chaos, utterly absent of evil. As Paul Neuchterlein says, "All the chaos and disorder has given way to God's loving power of [a new] creation."<sup>2</sup>

The promise of Revelation, then, the thing it points to is that day when the persistence of evil will be no more. When, in the beautiful words of the text, "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes."

As Christians we believe that the new creation has already begun in Jesus. It isn't the only way to get to a new creation. It may not even be better than every other way. But it is our way of understanding it. It is the story we tell. And in that story truth does ring out in blessed tones of hope. The story goes something like this.

God saw that humankind was a destructive, stiff-necked lot. God tried the flood. God scattered their language at Babel. God gave them the commandments. But still humankind would not straighten out. Many thought that God was filled with anger and vengeance. Well, now, maybe God got exasperated from time to time, but God was not filled with anger and

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<sup>2</sup>[http://girardianlectionary.net/year\\_c/easter5c.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/easter5c.htm)

vengeance. God was filled, instead, with great love for humankind. But God's heart was broken, for humankind caused so much trouble for itself and for all the rest of God's creatures. God longed for humankind to change. But evil, who seemed to survive the original defeat at creation in rather good shape, was very clever. As in the Garden of Eden, way back near the beginning, evil kept making people think they needed things they didn't. And then they would get in fights with other people who were acting the same way. But the real genius of evil was that evil convinced the people that whenever they were fighting other people, they were actually fighting evil. Evil convinced the people that they should have the things they wanted and that those who stood in their way were evil. So, pretty soon, people were saying that they were doing God's work, when they were really tricked by evil to do evil's work. They were doing evil's work in the name of God! One could say that evil was very good at what it did.

God realized that the situation was going to require drastic action. It was going to require that God show up in person. And it was pretty obvious that since humankind was doing a lot of evil in the name of God, it would probably do evil to God, too, if God showed up in person.

And sure enough. God came as a man named Jesus. He tried to teach humankind the way of God's love. But humankind wasn't having any of it. Some of them said, "this can't be God. God is strong, not weak like this man. God is a winner, not a loser." Others of humankind were more subtle than that. They realized that if people actually began to listen to the things that this man Jesus was saying, it would cost them. Herod and Pilate didn't want to lose their Roman offices. The high priests didn't want to lose the privileges of their offices either. So, they convinced themselves, one supposes, and then they convinced others that he was evil and needed to be executed in the name of God. As the Gospel of John says, "The light came into the world, but the world knew it not." Or at least the world accepted it not. So, they crucified him, and that was that. Evil had once again gotten them to do evil in the name of good, to kill God in the name of God. Evil was jubilant. Not even one person of humankind escaped evil's web. That Friday night evil went to bed and slept like a log. All day Saturday evil drank margaritas and celebrated the victory.

Evil awoke on Sunday to a bigger headache than he expected, though. For God in the man Jesus did not stay put. Irony of ironies, God hadn't fully defeated evil in Genesis, and now evil hadn't completely done in God. And worse, in fact worst of all, horrifying beyond imagination, God had changed the rules of the game. Evil's whole game-plan was that whenever good was attacked, good would fight back, and evil would convince humans that the good that was fighting back was evil. But this time, good did not fight back.

And evil began to realize, especially when he understood that Jesus was not done in, that this was a very big problem. Because it would not be long before people began to understand that Jesus was innocent, and that they had participated in killing good, not evil. And then, evil realized, the people would begin to realize that they had killed good at other times, even though they had convinced themselves that good was evil. Evil knew that if this happened, people would lose their love of evil, and evil would be defeated not by a battle wound, but instead by the simple power of love.

Now, of course, evil did not give up. Indeed, evil's tactics continue to work in many cases right up until today. But evil knows that eventually he will lose. It is just a matter of time. For even now there is happening a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. For God remains among us. The old earth and the old heaven, the old ways and the old battle, are passing

away. And the sea, chaos, evil is already on the way out. God the good is here.

<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more

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You can hear the promises even now, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." The raging sea of chaos is replaced by a well of fresh water. Death has given way to life. Our tears are wiped away. Amen.