

Message for May 22, 2022

Revelation 21:1-6a

Sometimes things happen in the world that have such an impact that even years later we remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard the news. Depending on our age for example, it might be the end of the Second World War, the assassination of JFK, or perhaps the death of Princess Diana. I am virtually certain that all of us remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard about the attacks on 9/11; it is seared into our collective consciousness. I wonder though, will the horrific tragedy in Buffalo last Saturday when a young man, twisted by hate, killed ten people just because they were black, be added to this list? Will people years from now remember where they were and what they were doing when they first heard this news? Or, despite all of the media attention of the past week, will this tragedy be largely forgotten and relegated to being just a footnote in the history books, just one more mass shooting of many in the United States?

Only time will tell, but no matter how history may record it, what happened was a devastating tragedy. But as horrible as this mass shooting most certainly was, it wasn't the only bad news last Saturday. There were also the latest reports on the war in Ukraine, including a prediction that it may profoundly disrupt the world's grain supply, raising the possibility that up to fifty million people may go hungry. There was also a report out of Afghanistan on how the economy there has collapsed since the Taliban took over, with the real possibility of mass starvation. While watching all of this unfold on TV, I said to Susan that we live in a sad twisted world where people, for whatever reason, think it is right to kill and injure others in the name of God, religion, politics or whatever else. It truly seems as if we are far removed from the Kingdom of God and its values such as love your enemies, pray for them, turn the other cheek, forgive, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And yet while we may be far removed from the kingdom of God here on earth, we are not without hope either. Hope in fact is the wonderful promise of today's scripture passage.

It was a sad and discouraging time to be a Christian. Almost five decades had passed since the resurrection of Jesus and the first rush of enthusiasm had long since dissipated. Then, to make matters worse, there was a harsh

government crackdown on the Christians. The Roman Empire was remarkably tolerant when it came to religion and in fact the authorities didn't care what, if any god, a person worshipped. What the authorities did insist upon however was that everyone worship the emperor once a year. This was a loyalty test and most people, convinced that there were all sorts of different gods, didn't see this as a problem. To the Christians however this was a major issue. They would obey the laws and pay their taxes, but they absolutely would not worship the emperor as if he was a god! The result was a severe crackdown and many Christians were executed.

One person who was caught up in all of this was a respected church leader named John. For some unknown reason though John was luckier than most because instead of being fed to the lions, the authorities decided to send him into exile to the remote Greek island of Patmos.

While on Patmos, John experienced an incredible series of visions. Years later he wrote them down and we know them today as the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. Revelation however didn't just become the last book of the Bible, it also became *the* most debated and most controversial book of the entire Bible and it's not hard to see why. When we read Revelation with its talk about such as the Lamb that was slain, the Beast, and so on, we are transported to a world far different from our own. Truly, as one person has said, reading Revelation is a little bit like reading Tolkien's "The Hobbit" or "Lord of the Rings"; we enter a world of symbolism where nothing is quite the way it seems.

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise then that there is a lot of debate about this book and how it should be understood. Some scholars for example say that more than anything else, Revelation is history and should be understood as such. John, using coded symbols that were clearly understood by his original readers, was making a commentary on Christian-Roman relations at the time. Others however say that Revelation, far from being history, is really prophesy and a prediction about what is going to happen on this earth at the end of time, the final showdown between good and evil. Yet others, while agreeing that the book is prophesy, insist that it isn't about the end of the world at all. Rather they believe that it is all about the end of our individual lives and what happens to us when we die. According to these people the New Jerusalem represents heaven or the life yet-to-come. And yet others say that all three interpretations are right and that Revelation is about what was and shall

be, both personally and on a grander scale. And which interpretation is the right one?

In the end, I don't think it really matters because the bottom line is still the same. To put it simply, no matter how we understand it John's visions offer us a tremendous message of hope, and that message is this; that in the end God is going to get what God wants. To put it another way, eventually the Lord's Prayer will be fulfilled and God's will *will* be done on earth just as it is in heaven. This was the tremendous message of hope that John held out to his fellow discouraged and suffering believers, and this is also his message of hope to us too.

As we all well know from firsthand experience, there are times when life is hard and filled with heartache, tragedy, and sorrow. At times life can be very unfair. We also live in a world where evil is very real and very powerful. Sadly, we live in a world where a young man can be so twisted with hate that he can take a gun and think that it is perfectly alright to kill people out doing their grocery shopping on a Saturday afternoon, and all because of the colour of their skin. But even so, despite all of the heartache and suffering in this world, in the end God is going to get what he wants. And what does God want? A world, a creation, where love triumphs over hate, good over evil, and justice over injustice. I like this story from years gone by.

The slaves were out working in the fields on a hot summer morning when they saw the master and his family come out of the house dressed in their fancy clothes on their way to church. Then one of the slaves started singing an old spiritual:

"I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven, goin' to put on my shoes, goin' to walk all over heaven."

That is what that barefoot slave thought heaven would be like. Heaven would be the place where he would be free. Heaven would be the place where he could own a pair of shoes and walk wherever he wanted to. Heaven would be the place where all of the world's injustices and inequalities would be no more. Heaven would be *the* place where God finally gets what God wants. And

that, no matter how we interpret it, is the great promise of John's Book of Revelation. Indeed what better, more fitting end to the Bible could there be than this tremendous and wonderful message of hope and promise? To return to today's scripture passage:

"And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'".

We live in a hurting world, but we do not live in a lost world without hope. The last book of the Bible contains the last and greatest promise and prediction of all; God *is* going to get what God wants.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer, not to confess or to praise, but rather to share with you our joys and concerns.

We give you thanks for the gift of this, the middle day of a long holiday weekend. We give you thanks for what this weekend means for so many people, the unofficial start of the summer season. We thank you for everything and everyone that makes life so good. We thank you for the goodness and beauty of the creation around us. Help us to remember that it is your creation, entrusted into our care to be used wisely and well.

As we give you thanks for this world in which we live, we remember John's vision of the world yet to come where nothing that has cursed the human race shall exist any longer, and all the tears shall be tears of joy. Until that day comes may we truly be your Son's faithful disciples.

We pray this day for everyone who, literally or figuratively, weeps. We pray for those struggling with health issues and those who so desperately miss a loved one. As inflation continues to rise, we pray for those who are wondering how they can possibly get by.

On this long holiday weekend, we pray for the safety of all out and about, and we pray too for the safety and well-being of your children in Ukraine as the war continues. We pray for those outside of that nation affected by the war, and those trying to cope with all of the disruptions including the threat to their food supply. We pray this day for the plight of the woman and girls in Afghanistan as the Taliban tightens its control, restricting education and dictating how they must dress and live.

We pray this morning for our American neighbours after the mass shooting last weekend as they try to come to grips with the terrible realities of racism and gun violence.

We remember and pray for our own nation and society as well with the discovery of yet more graves at the site of another former residential school. Help us to confront the reality of our past so that we might learn from it, and by doing so be a more just and kinder society. Grant we pray, that there may truly be reconciliation.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen