

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“New Creation”
By Eric Howell
Revelation 21:1-6
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The world can be a pretty discouraging place. We want things to be the way they are supposed to be for everyone. We want there to be peace between nations. We want creation to be protected. We want everyone to have enough to eat, for families to love their kids, for the world to be just and right. Some of this yearning is probably more or less universal for all people. We all want these things. Some of the yearning and desire is decidedly Christian. Our faith makes us hunger for our lives and the world to be the kind of place that God wants it to be. What makes it even more frustrating is when we look in the mirror and see that not only is the world in a mess, but I'm not who I want to be either.

Once upon a time, some Christians had a lot of confidence that things were headed in the right direction and that by their efforts they could bring about a more perfect world. In the late 1800s they dubbed the coming century, the Christian century. An optimistic lot they were, they gazed upon the yet unseen landscape of the 20th century and postulated “Yes, this is the time when the vision of Christianity takes hold for the world.” Well, after two world wars, the holocaust, the great depression and countless other calamities, much of it at the hands of Christians from the Third Reich to the genocide of Rwanda, we look back on the 20th century and can only wonder if calling it the Christian century isn't some sort of deeply ironic conviction of what Christianity has come to at the hands of its Christians.

Ok. Not trying to be too negative here, but now as the 21st century has dawned with terrorism, recession, natural and man-made environmental catastrophe, that sort of optimism about the world has been replaced with pessimism. It usually sounds like this, “What's the world coming to?” You hear that kind of question a lot. Sometimes it sounds like resignation or sentimentality for what used to be back in a simpler time. Sometimes it's anger—anger at politics and politicians, or at bosses and the economy. Sometimes it's just welled up frustration spilling out. What's this world coming to?

It's actually a good question. If we know enough not to embrace the self-assured optimism of an earlier time, must we thoroughly embrace the abject pessimism of our current day? What's this world coming to?

Scripture has something of an answer to that question though most of us are more familiar with the scripture about where the world came from rather than where it is going. We know the Genesis story not only because it's a beautiful picture of the creation of the world, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Not only because of the discussions and debates about the origins of life, but because any of us who try to read the Bible through at least make it through the first few chapters of Genesis. God created the world and created men and women and said, “It is good.”

Sometimes when we try to read the Bible straight through we don't get much farther than that before we get bogged down in the so-and-so begat so-and-so. And that's too bad, because the Bible tells a great story. It just takes a little work and a little help to put it all together. It's a story of a people who were created to be friends with God and to nurture the creation God gave them, but they turned their backs on God and lost Eden. The world's been a tough place since then.

Through the people of Israel, God showed the way he would try to reach the world, but even the chosen people, the ones who were to be a light to the world, had their own internal struggles. They couldn't or wouldn't stay faithful to God. They tried to take matters in their own hands. They treated the poor and powerless unjustly. They learned to hate their enemies rather than love them. Sometimes they acted like they hated one another. They gave homage and worship to things that were not God.

One day a carpenter from a small town up in northern Israel started talking about God and people started listening. To some of those people He made a lot of sense. To some of them, He sounded like a dangerous crazy man. It's always been that way with God's people. A small group dedicated their lives to Him. To that group He would say, "Love one another. Other people will know you are My disciples by the way you love one another. Love one another as I have loved you." They would soon learn that the "way I have loved you" would be a costly sacrificial kind of love. That was how they were to love one another—with a costly sacrificial love. "Greater love has no one than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." That was to be the mark, the single prominent, dominant characteristic of this new community, this new light to the world in hope that the whole world would join in with this love for God and one another. It started with just a few. They were an optimistic lot too, but they weren't naïve. They started telling about their faith and about Jesus and about His resurrection. And they went to prison for it. And they were stoned and crucified for it. But their blood became the seed of those that would follow them. The world has always been a tough place. And in the midst of it Christians have been faithful to this love, to this community and to God's idea for the world. Let's be honest. Sometimes Christians have made it a harder place for other people. We've not always done a good job of following Jesus. But at our best, we have been a faithful people.

We have fed hungry people and given cold water to people who are thirsty. We have tended the wounds of the dying; we have stood for the powerless. We have shared with other people the Good News that we have found in Jesus. Now, maybe we are confused about whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about the near future, but we know that whatever comes, we are called to be faithful and that the world is in God's hands.

The story of Adam back there at the beginning of the Bible is not a story that wanders off inconclusively. Without Jesus perhaps it would be that way. It would be a story that began with high hopes but turned tragic, and all that's left is to see whether it ends with a bang or a whimper. And the same could have been said about each of our lives. They begin with high hopes, but wander around without purpose until they end somehow, somewhere, for no real reason. If to any extent any human life looks like this—a life lived as one unfolding purposeless, tragic slow-burn of wandering—it is condemnation on us all who believe, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." There is still work to be done and mercy to be shown and love to be given. Jesus changes the story. Because of Jesus, we see that the story unfolds toward a purpose, toward a hope, toward a transformation. There was an Alpha. There is an Omega. There was a beginning. There is an end. What is this world coming to? At the very end of your big ol' Bible is a vision:

"I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

The story begins in a garden and ends with a city. Both are from God. Both are gifts given to humanity, both are beyond our imagination, but not beyond our hope. The sure hope of the future is in the total transformation of this world into that which is fully of God—when every tear will be wiped away and every pain relieved and death will be no more. God will make all things new.

Notice that this is God's work, God's action. God is the Alpha, and is not relying on us to be the omega. God began this and God will bring it to fulfillment. That doesn't mean that we don't have a role in it. All of scripture testifies to God's desire that God's people be windows to the world that God imagines. That God's people be first fruits of that which is coming. That God's people share the imagination of the world God desires and witness to that imagination by our words and our actions and our love. Christianity is not a sentimental journey down the memory lane of when things were so much better than they are now. Christianity is a spiritual journey toward the person in you and the new world we continue to pray and hope for and witness to by our self-giving love for one another.

What's the world coming to? Exactly what God wants it to come to. It certainly doesn't mean our problems are gone now or our temptations have less sharp teeth -- far from it. But Christian faith is that the forces of evil are ultimately defeated. All that's left is to finish the battle and wipe away the tears. Despite the appearances of the moment, God has already won in eternity. Rather than being the ones who bring it about by our work, efforts, and good intentions, our spiritual work is to be open to the work God is doing in us and in the world. It is God's Work; God's Mission for the world, and in you and me.

Thomas Merton, the 20th century Kentucky monk, recalls how his friend Lax, introduced an idea that changed the whole direction of his life and his whole concept of God's work in him when he was a young man. They were walking down 6th Avenue in New York toward Greenwich Village one day. Merton writes, "I forget what we were arguing about, but in the end Lax suddenly turned around and asked me the question, "What do you want to be anyway?" I felt I could not say, "I want to be Thomas Merton, the well-known writer of all those book reviews in the back pages of the Times Book Review," so I put the thing on the spiritual place, where I knew it belonged and said, "I don't know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic." "What do you mean you want to be a good Catholic?" The explanation I gave was lame enough, and expressed my confusion, and betrayed how little I had really thought about it at all. Lax did not accept it. "What you should say," he told me "what you should say is that you want to be a saint." "A saint?" The thought struck me as a little weird. I said: "How do you expect me to become a saint?" "By wanting to" said Lax simply. "I can't be a saint." I said, "I can't be a saint." And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities; the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they must do, cannot reach the level that they must reach: the cowardice that says, "I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin: but which means by those words, "I do not want to give up my sins and attachments."

The question isn't then what's the world coming to? The question is, because you know what the world is coming to, what are you coming to? What is your life becoming? What do you want to be anyway? It's a question more about your character than your major/ more about your soul than your socioeconomics/ more about what you give than what you get. What are you becoming? If you want to transform the world into something more just, more right, more peaceful, more godly, start by being open to the transformation God wants to work in you. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. The new creation starts with a new you.