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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/28/2013, The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The resurrection of Jesus has consequences that leap forward in every direction, including hope and morality in this present age, and then beyond that, the New Jerusalem to come. This morning's reading from Revelation is about that—the New Jerusalem. It invites us to rejoice in Easter by painting, as it were on a large canvas. It concerns the end of things.

My opening text, then, is the first verse of our reading from Revelation, Chapter 21. Saint John writes this:

<sup>1</sup>And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. (Revelation 21:1, KJV)

The detail about the sea concerns disorder and danger. For Israel, the sea is an image of chaos. The sea is the home of wild winds and crushing waves and the great sea monsters. Such danger and chaos will no longer be part of the new earth to come.

This text from Revelation 21 brings two ideas to my mind: First, sin, disorder, and chaos have their miserable season on earth, as we very well know, but that season shall not last forever. As our text puts it, they shall “pass away.” Do not be overly discouraged then. Better times are coming, thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, and you will be part of them.

And second, the Lord hastens to his work of making all things new, even now. He began on that first Easter dawn, he continues today, and he perfects his work by leading history on toward the New Jerusalem. And I say, let us not resist the One who wants to make us new, starting today.

## **BABYLON SHALL PASS AWAY**

So, my first point is this: Sin's season shall pass.

There is a disappointing city in the book of Revelation. It is the city called Babylon. Scholars say that in terms of a plain, practical city—a living city like we know—Saint John is probably referring to Rome, the mighty center of the Roman Empire. Rome was persecuting the early Church in those days. During the reign of Emperors Nero and Domitian, Christians were dying for their faith. St. John speaks of these Christian martyrs when he speaks of Babylon:

And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints,  
and of all that were slain upon the earth. (Revelation 18:24,  
KJV)

Politically, then, St. John might have Rome in mind when he speaks of Babylon. But spiritually, he means something larger than any particular city. He means the realm of sin, blasphemy, and idolatry. He means the world of rebellion against God, drunk with the blood of the martyrs, adorned with luxury and power, but too much given over to Satan and to the ways of sin. No particular earthly city is Babylon, and yet all earthly cities are too much Babylon.

The book of Revelation teaches that Babylon shall pass away:

<sup>9</sup>And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication  
and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her  
when they see the smoke of her burning; <sup>10</sup>they will stand  
far off, in fear of her torment, and say, “Alas, alas, the great  
city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your  
judgment has come.” (Revelation 18:9-10, NRSV)

I guess it is natural that the kings of Babylon should grieve for the passing of Babylon, for they reveled in her sinful ways. But upon second thought, I think that even those kings should be glad for the passing away of Babylon, for a better city takes her place. I mean, the new Jerusalem.

<sup>5</sup>And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all  
things *new*. (Revelation 21:5, KJV)

And so, old sinful Babylon is destined to be replaced by the New Jerusalem.

Oh! Not just new, but also better. The words describing the New Jerusalem are sweet to contemplate:

<sup>4</sup>And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and  
there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying,  
neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things  
are passed away.

“Would God I were in thee!” That’s a line from our Communion hymn this morning: “Jerusalem, My Happy Home”:

5 Jerusalem, my happy home,  
would God I were in thee!  
Would God my woes were at an end,  
thy joys that I might see!

Here below, we know too much dying, too much sorrow, and too much pain. But reality is not meaningless or aimless. It is moving on toward the New Jerusalem, and “would God I were in thee!”

## HARRIET TUBMAN

So, let me tell you some more about Harriet Tubman. She believed in the New Jerusalem. I talked about her in my Palm Sunday sermon. She was the run-away slave who kept returning south to lead more slaves north to freedom. On Palm Sunday I told the story of her throwing her arms around a captured slave up in Troy, New York, near Albany, suffering blows from the policemen’s clubs, but refusing to let go until at last she wearied out the officers, and the slave escaped. I took her sheltering of the slave with her body as an image of what Jesus did for us on the Cross: he sheltered us with his body all the way to death, that we might have life.

Now let me tell you another incident from the little biography about Harriet Tubman written by her friend Sarah Bradford. Harriet was determined to make another trip south to rescue some more slaves, but it was dangerous for her to do so. Mrs. Bradford tells the story this way:

At one time, when she felt called upon to go down for some company of slaves, she was, as she knew, watched for everywhere (for there had been an excited meeting of slaveholders, and they were determined to catch her, dead or alive), her friends gathered round her, imploring her not to go on in the face of danger and death, for they were sure she would never be allowed to return. And this was her answer:

“Now look yer! John saw de City, didn’t he?” “Yes, John saw de City.” “Well, what did he see? He saw twelve gates, didn’t he? Three of dose gates was on de north; three of ‘em was on de east; an’ three of ‘em was on de west; but dere was three more, an’ dem was on de -south-; an’ I reckon, if dey kill me down dere, I’ll git into one of dem gates, don’t you?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bradford, Sarah H.; Johnson, Oliver; Hopkins, Professor (2008-10-28). *Harriet Tubman - The Moses of Her People* [Illustrated] (p. 30). MacMay. Kindle Edition.

Harriet knew her Bible. Though she could not read, she knew her Bible and believed it. We can read about those twelve gates later on in our chapter, Revelation 21:12-13.

Now, this is real life! Either Harriet is going to go down south and rescue some slaves or she isn't. And the difference is the New Jerusalem. If she goes south, she risks her life, but gives herself the chance to do some extraordinary good in this world. If she doesn't return south, she remains safe. The difference for her is simply the New Jerusalem.

For us too, a new heaven and a new earth are coming. A world wherein dwells righteousness is coming, which means that unrighteousness is *a waste of our time*. Indeed, unrighteousness is unworthy of people on their journey toward the New Jerusalem.

So fight the good fight of peace even now. Hold your temper, hold your tongue, and seek peace with your loved ones and with your neighbors. Such things might be hard for us, but our efforts have this great blessing: they are in the flow of reality. They fit with the way things are actually going. They belong in the New Jerusalem.

Our Gospel Lesson puts the rule most positively and beautifully:

<sup>34</sup>A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34, RS)

Any other way of life is wasted effort. Sin and anger and disorder cannot stand for long. They are going to pass away. So lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven:

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (Matthew 6:19-20, KJV)

## **SECOND, NEW EVEN NOW**

My second point is that our God loves newness, and desires to make us into new people, beginning right now:

<sup>5</sup>And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. (Revelation 21:5, KJV)

When Jesus died on the Cross, Saint John records his mighty saying, “It is finished”:

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.  
(John 19:30, KJV)

What is finished? The first and most important answer is that Christ’s great battle with sin, death, and the devil was done, and Jesus had triumphed!

But one aspect of this is that *our* freedom has now begun. Something new beckons us now: Christ bids us to walk with him into newness of life. “Behold, I make all things new.”

New! Let no discouraged soul, then, say that its path is fixed, that goodness is beyond it, that holiness of life is out of reach, or that Christ cannot take up residence in our hearts and in our lives. For if there were ever one who loved newness, it is our Lord Jesus. It is his characteristic work, it is his great battle cry: Behold, I make all things new. Let him do it. He already whispers to you to do better in this world. You can hear him right there in your heart if only you will. Some of his words are quite clear and unmistakable: Honor thy father and thy mother. Be no murderer or thief or adulterer. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. These words are clear for each of us, and in the obeying of them we are led into adventures and new worlds. We become new as we listen and obey. Indeed, we become more fit for the New Jerusalem and more like Christ himself, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.