

NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH

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Revelation 21:1-6

I want you to imagine that you are in a car driving through Lebanon. You are on one of the main streets near the downtown. Maybe you are on West Main passing the church, or on South Cumberland headed for lunch at Demos. Or, if you are new to this area, think of a town that you know well. Now, look at the buildings that you are passing and think about the businesses that they house. You may see a bank, a doughnut shop, a movie theater, a barbershop, an oil change place, a car dealership, a grocery store, a gym, a gift store, and more. All of these places are part of the economy of the town. You don't need to go inside every one of these places to have a good idea of what they are like and what they do. A bank takes deposits and makes loans. The oil change place does that. At the grocery store you buy food. At the paint store you buy paint. For some quick cash you go to the pawn shop. You go to Starbucks to use the internet. It makes life easier to know what a particular business does simply based on the sign out front—bank, gym, auto parts, library, BBQ, and so on. What if we didn't know what each business did? Just think how frustrating it would be if you needed a part for your lawnmower and you had to go to every business asking, "Do you sell these?"

Now, get back in your car and start driving again. This time, you pass a church. You look at it. What is their business? What do they sell? What will you find inside that building?

To be honest, it is difficult to guess what you will find in a church. Every church is different—different people, different preachers, different theology and practices, different music, different ways of doing baptisms. Even as a church professional I have a hard time guessing what a particular church would be like if I were to go inside.

When we look at a business, we know what we will find there. Toy stores have toys, shoe stores have shoes, gas stations have hot dogs. But what should someone expect to find in a church? The answer is God. We should fully expect to encounter the Holy Spirit, to sense the presence of the Divine, to experience something that we can only describe as numinous, to be transported to a realm different than the one we inhabit every day. When we visit a house of worship, we should be disappointed if we don't come away with at least a sliver of the sacred.

That is our business; that is what we should offer here. That is what the word "church" on the sign out front declares—God is here. However, when people drive down West Main and get stopped at the light, do they look at our building and think, "God is there." Do we, the members of this church, expect to find God here?

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Today, I am reading from the book of Revelation. Revelation is the final book of our Bible and our reading is from one of the closing chapters of that book. In this passage, the author of Revelation tells of his vision. In this vision he beholds a *new heaven and a new earth*. In this vision the first heaven and the first earth have *passed away*. In this vision, the holy city of God—the *new Jerusalem*—descends from heaven. A great voice announces, *See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them*. The voice continues to speak, saying, *God 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*.

What we find in this reading is the crowning fulfillment of the great covenant God made with Abraham hundreds of generations earlier. You will recall that I preached on that covenant back before Easter during Lent. God called Abraham and Sarah and promised them a great nation of descendants if they would worship the Lord. The covenant is made and God is faithful to it. Abraham and Sarah's people, however, fail, time after time, to hold up their end and then turn their backs on God. God persists and each time brings them back into the fold. But the people just wander away again. Finally, God comes to us in person, as the Christ. In the ultimate observance of the covenant, God gives his own life to honor the covenant. Now, here in Revelation, we read of the culmination of this covenant in this vision of a new heaven and new earth. The old has not been discarded or erased, just improved—made new.

If you ask people what happens at the end of the Bible, many of them may tell you that the faithful are taken up in an event known as the Rapture. But that is not what we read here. The Rapture has no real basis in scripture. It is a fantasy of how in the end the righteous will be rewarded. In other words, lead a good Christian life and you will be taken up to heaven to live in the ultimate gated-community safe and separate from the undesirables of the world.

Our reading tells something quite different. In our reading, we discover a reverse-Rapture in which, instead of the faithful being lifted up, God comes down. It is God who is raptured to us. The new Jerusalem establishes heaven's foothold on earth. We hear the words, *See, the home of God is among mortals*. Then we hear words that sound very much like God's original covenant with Abraham: *God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them*. This is the promise of the great covenant, that God will always be with us. When God dwells with us and we with God, the pain of the old world will disappear. God will wipe away tears, *Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more*. This is what it is like to live in God's holy kingdom.

As people of faith, we must make a decision: is this vision in Revelation a description of things to come or is it of things that have already taken place? Is God's kingdom with us already or is it a future event? Some will strongly insist that these things have not happened and are reserved for the end times. But I will argue that we are already living in the new heaven and new earth. The kingdom of God is among us, just not fully. Occasionally, we are privileged to catch a glimpse of the kingdom. We normally see it in little acts of kindness and caring. If someone is searching for the kingdom, they should find it here, in the church. We are a special community—not special because we are better, but special because we are different. We should be different than the rest of the world. We are to be a community of faith living and working and worshiping together in a way that should mirror God's kingdom. To the world, we are to be the new Jerusalem. We are to demonstrate to the world what the kingdom of God is like and show that it is here. When people come to us then they should sense that this place is different, that we are different. They should see the kingdom in the way we treat one another and how we treat others, the way that we wipe away tears and display love and care to those who mourn and cry in pain. We do it not for profit or pleasure, but as our part of keeping the covenant with God. The church is the place where we worship and praise God with joy, where we fellowship with love, and where we demonstrate compassion for all our neighbors.

The nice thing about the idea of the Rapture is that it is neat and tidy—the good are set apart from the not-good. Everyone gets what they deserve. The reverse-rapture, on the other hand, is messy. Everyone must live in this world together. But it is different because God is here dwelling among us all.

What can we do for those driving past our building to let them know that the kingdom of God is open to them? The church is not a business like Walgreens or Cracker Barrel, but we are part of the economy of God's kingdom. Our business is to demonstrate a quality of life that reflects that kingdom, that tells people, "God loves you. God is here for you." Amen.