A.M.D.G. 5th Sunday of Easter – C Text: Revelation 21: 1-6

 April 24th, 2016

**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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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;
            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."
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." 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."

**Message paraphrase**

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea.

**2**I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband.

**3-5**I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.”

**6-8**Then he said, “It’s happened. I’m A to Z. I’m the Beginning, I’m the Conclusion. From Water-of-Life Well I give freely to the thirsty. I’ll be God to them, they’ll be sons and daughters to me.

**God Has Moved Into The Neighbourhood**

I want to invite you to do some imagining and exploring with me this morning. And to begin – I’d like to ask you some questions about heaven.

→ How many of you believe in heaven?

→ How would you define ‘heaven’?

→ What does it look like?

→ Where is it?

→ What happens there – if there is a there?

There is a segment in the North American Christian religious population that is absolutely convinced that we are all living in the end times. And they are focussed on the pressing need to convert people in time (ie. to ‘save’ people) to avoid what they predict will be a terrifying, all-encompassing, apocalyptic end of the world at the Second Coming of Christ. Even the movie industry in the last number of years has gotten into the picture – spawning such movies as:

\* Cloud Atlas

\* The Hunger Games

\* Mad Max: Fury Road

\* The Day The Earth Stood Still

\* After Earth

\* Children of Men *to name a few ….*

In fact – as I did some research – I found 64 English films made from 2000 – 2009 based on the apocalypse or end of the world and over 60 such films made since 2010. To say that our culture – both religious and secular – is somewhat preoccupied with ‘end times’ would be an understatement! Perhaps – given what is going on in the world these days – wars, natural disasters, the rise of terrorist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram, global warming and climate change, to name a few – this preoccupation is understandable. Some days you *have* to wonder how the world can survive all the madness that is going on!

So our scripture passage from the book of Revelation this morning, speaking of a new heaven and a new earth – with the declaration that God is making all things new – seems particularly appropriate and contemporary for us today. This is a scripture that is often heard at Christian funerals – when we are consoled by thinking of a future time when there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more death …. a lovely vision that speaks to the deepest longing of our hearts for ourselves and for those we have loved who are no longer with us physically.

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Having said that – many Christians, including preachers such as myself – approach the book of Revelation as a whole with some trepidation. As a piece of literature – it is often filled with strange symbols, cryptic analogies and terrifying visions. Although it is placed at the very end of the Bible as we know it – it wasn’t written as a conclusion to the Bible – but as a letter to 7 specific churches at the end of the First Century AD that were about one generation old as Christian communities.

The book itself is set in the context of a time – in some ways very similar to our own – a time of great turmoil, persecution and conflict. This was the time when being a Christian was exceedingly dangerous – when they were hunted and killed – even to the point of being fed to the lions by the Romans as a sport.

The writer of the book of Revelation was likely a Jewish-Christian who most probably witnessed the disaster of the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD that left the city of Jerusalem in ruins, many of his countryfolk killed and the glorious Temple in ruins. Exiled to the Isle of Patmos – cut off from his people, grieving the past, and unsure of what the future held – the vision we hear this morning expresses the longing of all of us to feel secure – to have a home and a place of our own. And it takes on even greater poignancy when read through the lens of the refugee crisis in our world today.

The reading starts off with a beautiful and all-encompassing vision of a new heaven and a new earth – with the new Jerusalem at its centre as the place where God dwells. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of this reading in ‘The Message’, writes,

*“I saw Heaven and earth new-created. AndI saw Holy Jerusalem, descending resplendent out of Heaven. Then I heard a Voice thunder from the Throne, saying, ‘Look! Look! God has moved into the neighbourhood – making a home with men and women!”*

What a great way of saying that God does not live in some far off place in the sky – but in our very midst. And what an intriguing thought to spur our religious imaginations about own own city and neighbourhood as places where God might find a home – places of co-operation, interdependence, diversity and welcome – places where we might find Christ lurking in our friends and neighbours.

As part of re-imagining our church for the future, our Church Council here at West Point Grey, is reading the book ‘Fishing Tips’ – based on how one church in Calgary revitalized their ministry. Perhaps in conjunction with that exploration of our current context for ministry – our reading this morning from Revelation challenges us to ask the questions:

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\* Where can God find a home in our neighbourhood?

\* Where is God creating a new thing in our midst?

\* And are we clear about the dream that we hold in our hearts – and is it part of God’s dream for this neighbourhood and for all creation?

We started out by sharing our visions of what heaven might be like. Our scripture this morning reminds us that God holds our lives – and that of all creation – from beginning to end. *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” God says, “the beginning and the end.”* It assures us that *whatever* awaits us at the end – the story isn’t over yet, there is more to come – and it is exceedingly beautiful.

But it also invites us into a vision of heaven – not just as a place of endings – but where God is *always* present – inviting us into the creation of a new earth where “*mourning and crying and pain will be no more*.” Heaven is not just a future event – it is also a current reality. God has moved into the neighbourhood – making God’s home among us. And we are invited to help bring into being in *our* day, in *our* place and neighbourhood, in *our* time – God’s vision of wholeness, justice and peace for all people and all creation.

Last week, in our service around Earth Day – Nick sang a favourite of many of us “*What A Wonderful World*”. It too speaks of a world in which God’s vision of heaven becomes a reality in the neighbourhoods in which we live. And so, I’m going to invite you to sing ‘What A Wonderful World” as a way of saying ‘Amen’ to God’s word of hope and encouragement to us through our scripture this morning: **"What A Wonderful World"**

I see trees of green,
red roses too.
I see them bloom,
for me and you.
And I think to myself,
what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue,
And clouds of white.
The bright blessed day,
The dark sacred night.
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.

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The colors of the rainbow,
So pretty in the sky.
Are also on the faces,
Of people going by,
I see friends shaking hands.
Saying, "How do you do?"
They're really saying,
"I love you".

I hear babies cry,
I watch them grow,
They'll learn much more,
Than I'll ever know.
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.
Yes, I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.  Oh yeah.