

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 12, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

The Vision to End All Visions

Revelation 21: 1-6 (9/02 & 9/03/17)

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My husband, Derrick, and I got married when I was 37-years-old. We met soon after I had moved to Bismarck – not long after I turned 36. Derrick had been married before... and I had spent much of my 20's and earlier 30's searching – quite unsuccessfully – for my Mr. Right.

But, at what seems to have been just the right time for both of us, we met. His marriage had ended... I was newly in Bismarck... and, after a somewhat whirlwind romance, we got married in January of 2016, on the coldest day of that season. In fact, on the screen, there we are on that happy day.

I don't say this lightly, but, our wedding day was a nearly perfect day. A day during which any problems in our lives, any struggles in our families, any tensions in our community and in our world – all of the *mess* sort of disappeared on that one, glorious day.

That in mind, hear again these words from today's Scripture reading:

*“Then I saw [the] New Jerusalem, that holy city, coming down from God in heaven. It was like a bride dressed in her wedding gown, waiting to meet her husband.”*¹

Other translations of the Bible read a bit differently... like,

*“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”*²

I love that imagery: *prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

¹ Revelation 21: 2 (CEV)

² Ibid, (KJV)

My wedding earrings were earrings my mom had worn...my veil was the veil my mom had made for my sister when she got married... my dress was carefully chosen... the necklace and bracelet matched perfectly... and my mother-in-law created my bouquet with skill and deep love.

I *loved* everything I wore on January 16, 2016. And it was all chosen and put together rather meticulously. But, when I see our wedding photos, I have to admit the best thing I wore that day – the best thing with which I was adorned – was my smile.

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

Of course, that day, I also loved seeing my man in his fancy tuxedo. But, similarly, his smile was the best thing *he* wore. We were adorned with joy and we will never forget that day.

When describing weddings, people often say things like, “The bride was a *vision* in white – and the groom looked *angelic* as he waited up front.” People say things like that as though there is something other-worldly or dream-like about brides and grooms on their wedding day. And maybe that's not too far off.

Like I said, our wedding day was a magical day where everything seemed just right. Problems in our lives, and in the world, were held at bay. That day was a still point where all we felt was love and joy. For that reason, in some ways, a wedding day is not really *real*. Any “perfect” day like that is, in some ways, not *real*.

Because the problems of life and the problems of this world do *not* magically disappear on days when our own little lives seem “perfect.”

Yet... Yet, there is a reason God gave the particular vision described in today's reading from Revelation chapter 21. And there is a reason God used wedding imagery in this particular vision. But we'll get back to that in a few minutes.

This weekend marks the final week in our summer series called *Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters*. In this series, we've gotten to know stories about biblical figures like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. We've explored visions of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

If you've been with us throughout this summer, you may have noticed that we have basically moved through the entire Bible over the course of this series, highlighting holy visions and divine encounters from the very *beginning...* and, now, to the very *end* of the Bible.

Today, we have arrived at the book of Revelation – the final book in our Bible. And I am the first to admit that the book of Revelation overwhelms me. Yet, more so than other books of the Bible, Revelation is *filled* with holy visions. So, frankly, despite its overwhelming nature, it would have been irresponsible of us not to have included a sermon from Revelation in this *Ghost Stories* series.

Now. Though we typically refer to this particular book of the Bible by simply calling it “Revelation,” many Bibles include a more complete title, calling this book something like “The Revelation to John.”

See, the entire book of Revelation is the recording of a series of visions that Jesus Christ gave to a man named John... John of Patmos, sometimes referred to as “John the Divine.” (For what it's worth, this John may or may not be the John of the *Gospel* of John.)

Whoever he was, this John was alive toward the end of the first Century A.D. - a time when the Christian church was very young... and when Christians were being persecuted mightily by the surrounding Roman Empire. John was a persecuted Christian who was likely sent by Rome to the Greek island of Patmos as a form of punishment for preaching and teaching about Jesus.

Unlike John, here, today, we live with the privilege of being free to come to a Christian house of worship.

By and large, we live without fear that we will be arrested or attacked for believing in Jesus or for telling others about him. In fact, we have members of law enforcement and members of the military who are openly *part of* our church!

That would not have been the case back in the first Century A.D. when the Christian church was new and growing. Rather than openly being *part of* Christian churches, Roman soldiers and officials were on the *hunt* for Christians. And John of Patmos was one of their victims.

As I said, John was likely exiled to the island of Patmos as a punishment by Rome for being Christian and for teaching others about Jesus.

It was an extremely challenging time to be Christian. And, as we've said in previous sermons in this series, God so often gives visions to particular people at particular times – often, in times of great challenge.

That is the case for pretty much *every vision* recorded in the Bible. And, by and large, that was the case for every individual who shared their own “ghost story” via video earlier in this series.

Though we don't have a video of a personal story from one of our McCabe persons *this* weekend, every other week of this series included someone from McCabe sharing their own experience of God giving them a vision, or of God coming very near to them... and, over and over again, those holy visions and divine encounters were born out of times of great challenge:

- the discernment of a potential new job...
- the experience of having been stranded outside in a car – for days – during a devastating North Dakota blizzard...
- a car accident...
- a child's cancer diagnosis...
- the list goes on and on.

Again: God gives visions to particular people at particular times – and those times are often times of great challenge.

Think about one of our *nation's* most famous visionaries, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His grand dream – his holy vision – of racial equality was born out of a culture of overt white supremacy and hatred. It was a dream from the 1960's and we are *still* working into that dream today, more than 50 years later.

God gives visions to particular people at particular times. And the visions that are most compelling, and that are most *needed*, continue to live on long beyond the life of visionary to whom God gave the vision.

I'm going to say that again:

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The book of Revelation is a book of visions given to a particular person, John of Patmos, at a particular time – a time when Christians in the early church were being persecuted mightily. And, if you know anything about the book of Revelation, you know that, for some, it's kind of terrifying.

Many of the visions in Revelation are of beasts, of fires, and of war. They conjure up the same kinds of fear the early Christians were likely feeling in the first Century... a time when the Roman Empire was quick to silence anyone who called on the name of Jesus.

Hear again Revelation 21:1-6:

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had disappeared, and so had the sea. Then I saw [the] New Jerusalem, that holy city, coming down from God in heaven. [It was] prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice shout from the throne:

"God's home is now with his people. He will live with them, and they will be his own. Yes, God will make his home among his people. He will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. These things of the past are gone forever."

“Then the one sitting on the throne said: ‘I am making everything new. Write down what I have said. My words are true and can be trusted. Everything is finished! I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will freely give water from the life-giving fountain to everyone who is thirsty.’”

Life was scary at the time when God gave John the visions recorded in the book of Revelation. So scary it seemed as though the earth itself was in crying out in pain.

Perhaps that's why God gave John this vision recorded in chapter 21 – this vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband... this vision of God restoring the earth... this vision of God dwelling *here*, among us mortals, for all eternity.

In this vision of restored creation, there is no more crying, no more death, no more fear, no more persecution. In this vision, God is here on earth and *all things are new*.

After a week of news about Hurricane Harvey, fires in Montana – not to mention natural disasters elsewhere in the world *and*, of course, our own personal disasters, natural or otherwise – with all that in mind, don't we *need* to be reminded that, someday, God is going to restore creation?

Don't we need to be reminded of the good news that, eventually, God *will* make all things new... that all *will* be perfect – for *real*?

On their wedding day, brides and grooms so often approach everything with an eager and a joyful anticipation. They are dressed to the nines, everything seems right with the world, and life is nothing but love and joy.

That, I believe, is what God intended to convey to John in the particular vision of Revelation 21. God intended to convey to John that, in the end, the problems and tensions of this world *will* pass away.

There will be no tears of sadness. No death. No persecution. No injustice. No fear. Only love and joy. Like on a perfect wedding day. Like on a perfect *day*.

It's a vision to end all visions. And it's amazing good news.

Friends in Christ, today, this good news is not only communicated to us through the vision in Revelation 21, but also through Holy Communion, which we will now celebrate.

See, whenever we celebrate Holy Communion, we join together as one body – diverse people with common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ – and we are nourished by the bread and cup. All of this is an enactment of the heavenly banquet God has been preparing for us since the beginning of Creation.

Through Holy Communion, we get to “practice” heaven's *perfection*.

So, what if we all prepared to receive the bread and cup of Communion with the heart of a bride or groom on their wedding day – the heart of those adorned with love and joy, eagerly anticipating all that is to come.

Let us pray...