

“All Things New”  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
All Saints’ Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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In James Michener’s book *Iberia*, there’s a wonderful passage in which Michener describes the medieval pilgrimages that were made all over Europe.

The most famous was one that began at Notre Dame in Paris, and moved 900 miles through France and Spain, all the way out to the seaside cathedral of Santiago de Compostella (the place where the bones of Jesus’ brother James were supposedly buried).

Who made this pilgrimage of 900 miles?

Some criminals were sentenced to make it as part of their punishment.

Ordinary Christians did it as an expression of their piety. Royalty did it—as a sign of solidarity with the people.

Through the hardship of the journey, they made their way toward the cathedral, which was truly a magnificent place. And when they got close enough, there was always a day when there would be one sharp-eyed member of the group who would get up early in the morning, and would be the very first one to spot, in the distance, the spires of the great cathedral.

Tradition had it that when the person spotted their destination, they were not supposed to say something mundane, like “I finally see it.”

No—on every pilgrimage, the solemn ritual had the person exclaim, “MY JOY! MY JOY!”<sup>1</sup>

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That ritual, of course, was a way for a weary group of pilgrims to keep up their hope, to say that their destination—my joy!—was now close at hand.

I was reminded of that passage by our text from Revelation today, on this All Saints’ Sunday.

Revelation, as you know, is a strange book.

It was written to a group or groups of Christians who were being persecuted during the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

By this time, the first disciples of Jesus had died—and Jesus had not yet returned as he had promised he would. So these churches who were suffering under the fist of Roman rule—there’s a good chance that they were also weary.

Tired of the journey.

Tired of suffering for their faith.

Tired of waiting for Jesus to return and set things right.

So John—not the disciple John, but a different John—writes to these churches to encourage them, to give them hope, to tell them to keep going on their journey.

And how does he do this?

He gives them a picture of the destination.

He gives them a picture of...MY JOY:

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<sup>1</sup> For calling my attention to this passage in Michener’s book, I am indebted to a lecture given by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Long at the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference in April, 1999 in Nashville, Tennessee.

“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...”

This picture that John paints—it’s more than a way of saying when you die, you’ll get to go to heaven.

It’s much richer than that.  
More IMMEDIATE than that.

The scholar Christopher Morse has written a book in which he introduces a wonderful phrase for describing this kind of apocalyptic vision that we find in Revelation, and in other places in the Gospels.

Morse writes:

“Central to the message of the Gospel is news that a *basileia* [or dominion, or kingdom] from heaven is ‘at hand’...It is not a dominion, or state of affairs, that is already *in place* as part of...the world that is passing away. In short, this *basileia* is announced as at hand, but not as *in hand*.”<sup>2</sup>

At hand...but not in hand.  
That’s what MY JOY announces.

And that’s what this text from Revelation is saying—not only to those weary churches of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but to weary Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To people who are tired of dealing with the pandemic, Revelation says: Keep your eyes peeled for MY JOY.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel As News*, New York: T & T Clark International, 2010.

To those who are tired of other things—tired of your grief, tired of your loneliness, tired of being tired: Don't lose sight of MY JOY!

God's dominion, God's kingdom—it's not **in hand**, but it's **at hand!**

And where do we find this inbreaking of God's kingdom?  
That is, perhaps, where our text for today is most surprising.

God's peace and love and grace break through into our lives,  
according to Revelation, when we reach THE END of something...

“...the first things have passed away.”

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So before we go farther, let me ask you:  
How are you with endings?  
When you come to the end of something, how do you handle it?

I suppose it all depends on what it is that's ending.  
For example, in the World Series at this moment, the Braves are up  
3-1 on the Astros.

For the record—from this Yankees fan: Go Braves!  
Can I get an “Amen”??!!

If Atlanta ends up winning the World Series, how many of you  
will find great joy in the end of this baseball season?

And if they lose...well, you'll just remind me that they did better  
than the Yankees did this year.

But it matters, right?

If we're talking about the end of something, it matters what kind of ending we're discussing.

If I say, "the end of the baseball season," it's one thing.

If I say, "the end of a relationship," or "the end of a job," or simply the end of a particular time in your life that you loved...

where is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in all that?

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A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* was written by an expert on retirement.

For 44 years, David Ekerdt studied retirement, wrote about retirement, surveyed and interviewed women and men as they entered and adapted to retirement.

A teacher and a sociologist, Ekerdt was confident that he knew the lay of the land when it came to retirement.

And then, he writes, HE retired:

"...despite everything I knew," he says,

"despite the thousands of retirees I've talked to...

there was still plenty that I wasn't prepared for."

One example has to do with how he spends his time.

"Making time count—that stubborn old motor [in my mind] has been running for years and has yet to slow down....I have two angels perched on my opposite shoulders. One whispers in my ear, 'Relax!' The other asks, 'Shouldn't you be doing something?'"

“Perhaps someday I will get to the point when I can say, ‘I got up this morning without much to do and I hadn’t finished it by the time I went to bed.’”

But at the moment, Ekerdt says he lives with a “puzzling ambiguity.”<sup>3</sup>

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That’s not a bad way to describe our response to so many of the endings we encounter.

Puzzling ambiguity.

Maybe your youngest child has finally left for college, and you’ve got an empty nest. You come home from work at night, and it’s still your house, you’ve still got the same family, same kids...but a part of you knows that it’s not quite the same home, because it no longer houses your kids, and there’s been a significant change in your family.

How do you handle that kind of ending?

Maybe you’ve lost a parent this past year.  
Maybe you’ve had your own health scare this year.

There are BEFORE and AFTERS in all of our lives, and at some level, the endings of life turn our hearts upside down.

So the question becomes—what do we do?

When we come to an ending in our life, where do we go from there?

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<sup>3</sup> David Ekerdt, “I Spent 44 Years Studying Retirement. Then I Retired.” From *The Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2021, found at [I Spent 44 Years Studying Retirement. Then I Retired. - WSJ](#).

Let me get at the question this way.

I'm curious...did any of you here today notice that the Harbinger that you hold in your hands right now is slightly different than the Harbinger that you received at home this week?

It's ok if you didn't notice.

The difference is very small.

It's in the sermon title.

In the Harbinger that was sent to you at home, the sermon title was "The End."

Why?

Because I knew I wanted to talk about endings today.

But this morning, the title is "All Things New."

Why did I do that?

Not just because sometime between Monday and Friday I changed my mind. I did it because that's the MOVEMENT—from "the end" to "all things new"—that's the movement that John makes in our text.

And it's the movement that God promises to make for us.

"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."

"And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'"

Over and over again, the Bible reminds us that we cannot avoid endings:

Jesus said: "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Paul once wrote:

"...prophecies, they will come to an end;

"...tongues, they will cease;

"as for knowledge, it will come to an end."

But love, Paul wrote: "Love never ends."

We are not in control, however much we want to be, of the endings in our lives.

We approach endings, and we ask ourselves:

How can I handle this?

Why did this happen?

What can I do to get my life in a good place again?

But Revelation gives us a different question.

Not how, what, why, when...Revelation asks WHO!

When you and I arrive at an ending...who will be there for us?

This past week, I had the privilege and joy of attending a silent auction for Soteria. Soteria, as I've mentioned before, helps formerly incarcerated individuals make the transition back to living a stable and productive life.

At this event, there was a panel of speakers, and one of those speakers spoke about her struggles after she was released from prison.

How she got a job making minimum wage, which wasn't nearly enough to make ends meet.



How she had three kids to take care of, and how it felt next to impossible, while on parole, to feed them and take care of them and pay her bills and pursue the college degree she always wanted. She even got accepted to college, but couldn't accept the invitation to attend, because she needed to care for her kids.

What amazed me was the calm demeanor she kept when telling her story—this harrowing, incredible story of hers—she was so calm, except for one part.

Her voiced quavered when she spoke of the day when she needed to fill her car with gas.

But she was down to her last \$5.

If she spends that \$5 on gas, she runs out of gas really soon, and then there's no transportation, how does she get to work, how does she feed her family?

She was losing her grip at that gas station, when a stranger saw her upset, and this stranger came over and said, "Here, let me fill your tank for you."

It made all the difference, she said.

That single act of generosity was the INBREAKING of God's kingdom...and it gave her the hope she needed to make it through that day, that week, that month.

She spoke of that person—who remained a total stranger, who left the gas station and never knew the ripples of the gift he gave to her—she spoke of that person like God SENT him.

I don't think she used the word saint.

But she spoke of him as a saint.

Because what he helped give her was NEWNESS...  
 new hope—  
 and in a way no one could predict,  
 he contributed to the new life that she has today.

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Some of you were there last Thursday night, and you heard her.  
 I wish all of you could have heard her.

People talk about saints like they're superheroes, extraordinary  
 people—the Dorothy Days, the Mother Therasas,  
                   the Martin Luther King, Jrs of the world...  
 but you don't have to become Dorothy Day or MLK to  
 be a saint.

You just have to be sent by God.  
 You just have to be able SEE that God's hope and grace,  
                   while not IN HAND, are most definitely AT HAND...

I recall when my grandfather, my mother's father, was dying.  
 This was over 25 years ago now.  
 He was in a nursing home in California.

I wasn't there, but my uncle and aunt were there. And it was  
 difficult for them, because grief has a way of catching us off-guard.

My aunt, who was a nurse,  
                   had trouble admitting her dad was dying.  
 My uncle had trouble saying ANYTHING at that moment.

But another nurse came into the room at one point, and she surveyed the situation—and then took my grandfather’s hand in hers, and she said:

“You go with God, Mr. Cooper.  
You go with God.”

And a few minutes later, my grandfather died.

Was that her job, as a nurse?  
Her job was to take blood pressures, check heartrates.  
But she understood that she had an even greater calling.

The calling to be a witness, that while God’s kingdom was not yet IN HAND, God’s love and grace, in that hospital room, were most definitely AT HAND.

And she gave our family a gift.  
A gift to those in the room,  
and a gift to me, when I heard that story,  
thousands of miles away from the room.

The gift she gave us—it was more than kind words.  
It was: My joy! My joy!

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Of course, you and I can do the same thing.

Before today is over, we can bear witness to the good news that while God’s kingdom is not yet in hand, we can see it. And the good news is that we don’t have to travel to Santiago de Campostella to do it.

You can share MY JOY at home or at work  
or at school or in retirement...

All you have to do is claim your baptismal identity as one of God's saints. Just be the generous, compassionate, hopeful, sent-by-God person—whom God has already created you to be... and let God take care of how it all ends.

Amen.