



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter
St. Mark's on the Campus
May 6, 2007

GOD acting in *new ways*, God bringing about *new realities* is a continual theme in our readings for this morning.

In our reading from Acts, we find Peter in the church in Jerusalem explaining to the other Jewish followers of Jesus *why* he proclaimed the word of God to the *Gentiles*. Peter tells them of his vision from God and the way in which God made clear to him that the Gentiles not only *could* be part of this new community with Jesus at the center of it but that they *should* be part of the community. And to confirm it, God pours out the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles just as God had poured it out on the Jewish followers of Jesus.

The other disciples' response? "They praised God, saying, "Then God has given *even to the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life!" By golly – *even* to the Gentiles. Even to people like most of us. It's rather humbling, isn't it, to think of the early church discussing whether most of us should be allowed to be part of it? A humbling reminder of the embrace of God, and just how big it really is.

Those other disciples are reminded of just how big God's love is that day, and that good news sticks with the church for a while, until we feel once again that we need to keep somebody else out of the ranks, that we need to protect God's community from someone more impure than we ourselves are.

In our gospel, we find Jesus at the last supper, having just washed his disciples' feet, a sign of the servant ministry that the community that gathers around him is supposed to be about.

Jesus then says to them, "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." *Just as I love you* – just as *I wash your* feet, just as I hang upon the cross for the entire world, including you – just as I love you, you are to love one another. God doing something new in Jesus. Revealing in Jesus what has been true throughout eternity and will always be true: the vast reach of God's love. The cross becomes a new expression of that eternal love. Something new, and something as old as the hills – indeed, older.

You might have noticed that in talking about our readings, I skipped from our first reading in Acts to John's Gospel. I want to spend most of my time on the passage we have from the Revelation to John this morning.

"I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. . . . 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 . . . I am making all things new."

One of the commentators I read about this passage makes the crucial observation that in John's vision, God doesn't make *all new things*, God makes *all things new*. God doesn't do away with what has been; God redeems it, reclaims it, gives it new meaning and where necessary, new life. That is work God's up to all the time, not just at the end: redeeming, reclaiming, filling with the Holy Spirit to bring new life wherever death reigns.

Sometimes it takes longer than we'd like to see it happen, whether it's in the world around us or in our private lives. But we can count on God working to redeem and reclaim that which is astray. In our reading from Revelation, for example, it is not a *new* city, but rather it's the holy city Jerusalem *made new* by the grace of God: that's part of the metaphor of the holy city "coming

down from heaven”: the end state of this world – a state (and you can hear that word in both senses: “a state of being” but also a place) the end state of this world is one in which God is ever present and God is ever praised. And that state is not finally brought about by us and by our efforts, as critical as they are. It is brought about by God’s *merciful* grace. That’s the significance of John seeing the holy city coming down out of heaven --- not that God is “up there” somewhere, but that God is the one who must finally bring that state into being. We can not do it on our own.

Many people dream these days about Jerusalem, about that city that has the *shalom* of God at its heart, as revealed in its name. That dream is that the peace of God – the shalom of God - might reign throughout the city and not just in its name. Surely such peace would be a sign of God reigning in this world. Could it be that such a new Jerusalem would reflect in some way that which we can’t now anticipate: that is, Jews, Muslims and Christians – maybe even those outside the traditions reaching back to Abraham -- all of us living together in *shalom*?

This passage suggests maybe so, just as that reading from Acts suggests that God is always bring together what we in our limited vision have trouble bringing together. John has inherited most of his images from earlier scriptural passages. But he has slightly changed them. Take the line, “God will dwell with mortals as their God; they will be his peoples” It’s virtually a quote from Ezekiel, when God says, “My dwelling place shall be with them,” – that is the people of Israel – “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

John changes it a little bit, but an important little bit: he makes it plural: “God will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his *peoples*.” Peoples plural. The vision John expresses is for more than just the initial chosen people in that holy city. It’s for peoples plural: a fulfillment of that early promise of God to Abraham: through you the families of the earth will be blessed.

We’re back again to the Gentiles being included in this radically inclusive vision of God. God is amazingly gracious. More gracious than you or I can ever be. Gracious enough to include even us. Even us. And even those whom we do everything in our power to convince ourselves are not

fellow human beings but our enemies. For God is making ALL things new, John says. Again, John lifts this phrase from Isaiah (43:19), in which God proclaims: “Look I am doing something new!” But John expands the vision: God is not making one thing new; God is making ALL things new. Anyone who wants to be part of God’s city may enter its gates, may enter this place of praise and peace, this state of *shalom*. Or we may stand outside it. We always have that option. It’s an option we live into and out of every day of our lives.

As that same commentator says of the new Jerusalem, “If this is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God is finally going, then every thought, every move, every deed in some *other* direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted.” Every step we take in a direction *other than* through the gates of that new Jerusalem is one taken out of step with reality as God has created it – and therefore it’s a step that is, in the end, utterly wasted.

Whenever we hold back our forgiveness; when we cling to what we hold most dear – whether it be money or degrees or prestige or our own desires rather than the passion of God, or even one another rather than clinging to God; when we choose not to love, whether it’s those closest to us or those around the globe – when we choose not “to respect the dignity of every human being” in the words of our baptismal covenant – Whenever we act in some other direction, toward some other destination than the holy city to which the world is moving, we are wasting the life that God has given us, and that moment, that time, that space, is forever lost. It won’t survive because it can’t survive in the *shalom* of God, in the new Jerusalem filled with peace.

And -- ultimately -- we would not want it to survive. Because in our hearts we know how much we depend on the redemption that God promises. We don’t have to live long with ourselves and one another to know how much we rely on God’s redemption. How much we need it. How much we trust in the love of God promised to us Jesus Christ our Lord.

Promised even to us.