

## FROM THE PULPIT OF FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**SERMON: “And Death Shall Be No More...!”**

**Nov. 1, 2009**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Eternal God, whose holy love stands at the beginning and the end of all things, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the author and finisher of the drama of salvation. By the power of your Spirit enable us to hear and take to heart your word of promise envisioned by John, so that we, too, may live in hope, looking forward in faith to the triumph of your grace over all the powers of sin and death; through Christ our Lord, the Lamb upon the throne, who makes all things new. Amen.

New Testament Lesson: The Revelation to John 21:1-6, 22:1-5

To me those are among the most beautiful words in all the Bible. It may not be a very Presbyterian thing to say, but I love the Revelation to John, especially the final chapters from which we just read. Here John sets before us a vision of hope that almost literally “blows our minds.” The Revelation ends with a torrent of images that gush forth like water from a fire hose. They are more than we can take in--more than we can get our minds around. The images invite our adoration more than our understanding, as John is given a vision of the indescribable.

Look again at the flood of images--as the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes down from heaven like a bride at her wedding--and a river flows through the middle of the city watering a tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. And in the midst of the city stands the throne of God and the Lamb that was slain, and into the city, illumined by the glory of God, kings and nations bring their treasures. John is just getting started. In a portion of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter that we didn't read this morning, the city “coming down out of heaven from God” is depicted as being “pure gold, clear as glass.” Its wall rests on a foundation of 12 precious jewels that reflect the glory of God in a rich kaleidoscope of colors.

None of this can be taken literally, but all of it can be taken seriously, as John sets before us a stunning vision of the fulfillment of all of God's promises of salvation. Across the ages, John's vision has given hope to the people of God even in the face of Death itself.

It is a hope many of us need very much these days. Over the past months we have said goodbye to what seems like an unusually large number of the great “saints” of this church, with Mildred Kyser now being the latest. In our arrangement of flowers this morning there are white roses representing each of our members who have died this past year. Later in our service we will read their names and remember with gratitude their witness of faith. Sixteen precious members of this family of faith—ones who in countless ways have blessed us all. Sixteen!

And yet even *one* death is enough to raise huge questions about the meaning of life in the face of the death that separates us. On *All Saints Day* in particular it is important for us to render an account of the hope that is ours in Christ. As ashes are sprinkled in the Memorial Garden, as the casket is lowered into the ground, we wonder, Is this how it all ends? Does death have the final word? Was Shakespeare's *Macbeth* right in fearing that

“...all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more."

So, is all our living and loving merely "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"? We may not ask it so poetically, but still one way or another, at one time or another, especially when we grieve the loss of a loved one, we ask, **"What can we really hope for in the face of the undeniable reality of death?"**

Scripture is clear in the matter—both in terms of acknowledging the reality of death and in affirming the "undoing of death" in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible does not mince words. It does not seek to gloss over the reality of death. Scripture acknowledges that we **"are dust and to dust we shall return."**

And yet over against the undeniable reality of death, the New Testament sets the promise that the Lord God will dwell in the midst of his people forever, and that God will **wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away, and he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new!"**

That's a lovely thought, to be sure! *But is it true?* Is it one of the most precious promises in all of scripture, or just preacher-talk? To some the hope that "death shall be no more" is nothing more than wishful thinking. It is a whistling in the dark as we walk through the graveyard of life. Some would insist that this life is all there is, and the sooner we come to grips with that fact the better off we will be. Illusions of a life to come, they say, only serve to distract us from making the most of this life, however brief and troubled it may be.

And yet, as believers, we are convinced that our hope for the conquest of death is not something we have made up on our own to make death seem less real and fearful. It is not an illusion rooted in our own wishful thinking. Our hope for the undoing of death is rooted solely, yet securely, in the promises of the living God, made tangible in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You see, it makes all the difference in the world whether John's lovely vision of the defeat of death grows out of his own fertile religious imagination, or whether it comes by revelation from the Creator of the heavens and the earth. If our hope for the time when "death shall be no more" is merely a matter of our own longing for more of life and love to come, then that hope, however precious it may seem to us, has about as much reality as the image of a sunrise on a sympathy card.<sup>1</sup> It is only as our hope is rooted in the actual promises of the living God, that we can trust it with all our being for time and eternity.

At the end of his Revelation, John pulls out every image from the Old Testament he can lay his hands on to say one thing above all else... **"And death shall be no more."** The God who called life into being out of nothing "in the beginning" has power to call life into being once again out of the final nothingness of death. Not only does God have the power to

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<sup>1</sup> The image of a sunrise on a sympathy card was suggested by Fleming Rutledge in her sermon, "Apocryphal or Real?" in *The Bible and the New York Times*.

do so. God *promises* to do so! God gives us his word. **“Death shall be no more... Behold, I make all things new.”**

That great promise assures us that those whom we have loved and lost for the time being are not lost to God, and neither is this death-haunted world in which we “strut and fret” our hour upon the stage of live. There is hope for us as individuals and hope for the whole created order. The two are closely linked. God has promised not only to save individuals for eternal communion, but to refashion a new creation in which all the redeemed of all the ages will live together in perfect fellowship with God and one another.

The Creator who breathed life into the clay of his creation will not abandon to “dusty death” those on whom he has set the seal of his undying love. As I have said countless times before, **“Once God loves, God loves forever.”** God does not love for a moment, and then toss us aside like a child who has grown tired of playing with a once favorite toy. “Once God loves, God loves forever.” That means that for the believer, death is not a door slammed in the face of love. It is a door that opens into the fuller presence of the Lord who has written in his own blood the enduring promise that nothing in life or death will ever separate us from his love in Jesus Christ.

I am convinced, and I am more strongly convinced all the time, that in death we go immediately into the fuller presence of the risen Christ. In his eternal love we “rest in peace.” I do not know quite what that means, but at the very least I believe that it means that in his love we are renewed and refreshed. The wounds of our humanity are healed, our sins are forgiven, and we are reconciled with all Christ’s people, so that in him we may share in the great fellowship of “all the saints who from their labors rest.”

We are assured on almost every page of the New Testament, that after death we will be with Christ and with all whom he has called to be his own. But that’s not the end of the matter. It is not the fulfillment of God’s purposes of redemption. The drama of salvation does not end with us being held in our Savior’s love as individuals. It moves on to the redemption of God’s whole creation— what John calls a “new heaven and new earth.” In the New Creation all the forces that would warp and destroy human life are ended. All that is evil is judged and burned up forever. All that is good and fine and lovely and excellent and beautiful and precious is perfected and preserved forever in God’s New Creation.

We cannot describe all this literally. We have no blue prints of the new creation. The best we can do is follow John’s lead as we speak in symbols and images that point, however inadequately, to the fulfillment of God’s love for us and all that God has made. No matter what we may say, the reality of God’s redeeming love far exceeds all that we can ever say or think or imagine.

In the inspired poetry of ultimate hope, John declares that in God’s New Creation,  
**“There shall be no more anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.”**

The drama of biblical faith ends with a magnificent vision of hope, not just for us and those whom we love, but for the triumph of all the just and loving purposes of the living God. There is much we do not and cannot yet know about the life to come in God's New Creation. But in faith there is much we can trust whole-heartedly. Our hope is not rooted in our own vision of heaven, however glorious it may be. Our hope is in a **Person**—the One who has called us by name, who keeps and carries us in his love all our days, and who has promised to bring to completion all that he has begun in our lives and in his world. "Once God loves, God loves forever."

In that assurance, even with tears in our eyes, we can entrust our beloved to the eternal mercy of Almighty God, and we can get on with the tasks to which God is calling us here and now as we seek to live into God's promised future.

The hope that is ours in Christ not only promises blessed reunion with those whom we love and have lost for the time being. It also assures us that all that we do in obedience to Jesus Christ will not be in vain. In caring for creation, in welcoming the stranger, in working for health and wholeness, we are not merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. We are not planting a garden that will be turned into a parking lot. We are offering our love and our labors to God to use as he sees fit in the fashioning of his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Nothing we do in the name of Christ is ever wasted in this life or in the life to come. The Anglican theologian N. T. Wright, who in so many ways has influenced how I think about these matters, puts it this way:

"Everyone act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings, and for that matter one's fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make."<sup>2</sup>

Nothing we do in faith and hope and love is ever lost--nothing is ever wasted--in God's New Creation.

The hope that is ours in Christ not only assures us that we will see and know and be joined to our loved ones again. It also gives us confidence and courage for the living of these days, until, with all the faithful of all the ages, we take our place in the New Creation that God has surely promised and even now is bringing into being. To God be the glory, now and forever more.

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (HarperOne, 2008) p. 208.