

Sermon for Trinity Church

Easter 5, 2019

"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."

The Trinity congregation had gathered for the Easter Vigil outside the church in the evening light, after the sun had gone down. Jed had a steel bowl of wood before him, ready to light the great Easter light. That light marks a signal passed from generation to generation, and from continent to continent, signaling the beginning of our holiest of days, Easter. Just then, a car full of young men passed on Wall Street. They first shattered the silence with an air horn followed by one of the men shouting, "Religion is a sham!" I'm glad to report that none of your fellow parishioners responded in anger; in fact, all held their peace. But I was left wondering, why shout this? What exactly does the man mean by shouting that religion is a "sham?" Are we not what we say we are? More than that, isn't there truth in what we believe?

As a few of you might know, I tend to ruminate on ideas, working them over in my head. Sham? What could the man have meant by sham? In its simplest form, a sham is something that is not what it is purported to be. Are we, as followers of Christ, worshipping at Trinity Church, not what we claim to be? Are we not kind? Loving? Attentive? Truth is, no church or Christian community, or for that matter, any human community, is all those things all the time. And to be sure, historically, some espoused Christians have been far less. You might not be surprised to discover that Crusaders shouted 'Praise the Lord' while splitting open an enemy with an ax.

Maybe that's what the young man meant by 'sham, but I can't know. More critically, the young man might be defaming all religions, and ours in particular, for promising something we cannot deliver of our own human strength. Can we deliver world peace? Evidently not. For centuries we've battled among ourselves. Can we bring support to all in need? Not in the short run, it seems. The poor are still with us. More powerfully, given that it was the Vigil of Easter, can we humans deliver the victory over death, the revolution to end all revolutions? Well, left to human initiative, no.

A few weeks ago, I preached about the 'Book of Revolution.' I say "revolution" instead of 'revelation' because of a happy accident that reflects the real character of the Book of Revelation—of course, it's about revolution. And as we hear in this morning's reading, it's a final revolution, a time when, in terms of absolute beginnings and endings, in the Alpha and Omega, God has come to live with us. That's a powerful revolution, don't you think?

Now, you may find the notion that the book of Revelation is about revolution a bit perplexing. After all, when we talk about revolution, we're invoking some pretty powerful human ideas. Historically, revolution has marked turning point after turning point in human history. Most often when we think of revolution, I suppose we think of political revolutions. The French Revolution, the Russian and the Chinese, and even in the United States, the revolution one person has called 'the Great American Experiment.' That pundit has implied that this American revolution is far from over and the results far from guaranteed. All in all, looking back on these political revolutions, none of them have ended in unqualified success. Think about the Arab Spring; for a moment in time, it looked like a great opportunity for freedom; and then, it collapsed under the weight of its own efforts. Human revolutions, in and of themselves, have not been the most successful of human endeavors.

Of course, there are other human revolutions, some of which have held great promise. Think of the computer revolution, the green revolution, medical therapy revolutions, atomic and scientific revolutions. All of them have been life shaping but none of them has kept its promise for humankind. As far as the computer goes, now we must worry about addicting screen time or the prospect of an Artificial Intelligence run amuck. In gene therapy, we've gone from promising developments in cancer treatment to concerned caution about genetically modified infants. And we all know about atomic revolutions; it only took a few decades from the moment the idea of atoms was conceived until the first atomic bomb test. Does this recounting of history mean that every revolution is a downer? Not really, but all of these represent a caution to humankind, that all of our human efforts can in fact become, as the young man shouted, a sham. We cannot guarantee our own best future.

But God can, and that's where Easter and this reading from the 'Book of Revolution' lead us. Humanity may not be able to assure its own successes, but God can. God came into human history in Christ, and set in motion the final revolution

What makes this revolution so different? God made it, God acted, God in Christ came to us and conquered. We thought death was our greatest foe, unconquerable and certainly not subject to human revolution. We have, by our own

human efforts, not been able to conquer death. Not to say that there haven't been Babel-like efforts to do so but all have failed. But God has not failed, and the Resurrection is the evidence. When Christ rose from the dead that Easter morning, God set in motion the elements of a revolution that cannot be suppressed, cannot mislead, cannot be a sham. Why? Because God gives us the assurance, the guarantee of the future, in the resurrected Christ.

This morning, we can read and see. "...I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... [the people of God] will be [God's] peoples, and God himself will be with them; [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...". That's the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, that God has come for us in Jesus Christ. God makes an eternal "no" to death and an eternal "yes" to humankind and life. Amen.

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