

**All Shall Be Well**

*Revelation 21:1-6a*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Well, this is kind of a dramatic shift, isn't it?

Last week, we were talking about the birth of Jesus. Now, we're talking about the end of the world.

Last week, the Messiah was born. This week, it's the final judgment.

Last week, the *first* Advent. This week, the *last* Advent.

It's like we decided to read the first page of the New Testament and then sneak a peak at the last page to see how it would turn out

I don't know who assigned the lectionary text for today, but, whoever it was, they seem to have been following the advice of movie director Cecil B. De Mille, who said, "Start with an earthquake, then build to the climax."

What a way to start the New Year, huh? With a sermon about the end times...

The book of Revelation has long been a point of contention among Christians and theologians. Martin Luther detested the book of Revelation, claiming that he "can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" and that "Christ is neither taught nor known in it" (LW, 35:398-399).

But for others, it stirs up the imagination: seven headed dragons and beasts and the four horsemen of the apocalypse and a God who is in control of it all.

Of course, it was the "Left Behind" series that made popular the idea of a great rapture — a moment when all the faithful believers would disappear from the face of the earth in an instant and be raptured up to heaven.

Did you know that there is a website called *raptureready.com*, and it has what it calls its "Rapture Index?"

The author of the site says that its rapture index is like the Dow Industrial Average for end of time activity. The index is like a prophetic speedometer — the higher the number the faster the author believes we're careening towards the end of times, which according to some will surely begin with the "rapture" of all righteous believers from the face of the earth.

In case you were wondering (and I have to assume that you were), we are currently sitting at 186 points according to the index — well above the 160-point mark, which is

the threshold for when Christians need to “fasten their seatbelts” and prepare for the end.

But, there is a silver lining. If the “Rapture Index” is right, and we are, in fact, careening toward the end of all things, then the silver lining is that we don’t have to bother this year with those pesky New Year’s resolutions. I mean, what’s the point of dropping those pounds if none of us are going to make it to swimsuit season any way, right?

But just in case the “Rapture Index” isn’t right and we will have to face the entire year, I went ahead and did an internet search this last week and came up with the top 10 resolutions for 2023. Here they are in no particular order.

1. Spend more time with family and friends.
2. Get in shape.
3. Lose some weight.
4. Quit smoking.
5. Enjoy life more.
6. Quit drinking.
7. Get out of debt.
8. Learn something new.
9. Help others more.
10. Get organized.

Now, I’m guessing there was nothing really revolutionary on that list for you. Probably, some of these things are already on your list — or will be, barring the rapture. But, I also couldn’t help but notice that these resolutions not only suggest the kind of people we want to be, but also the kind of people we *are*.

Apparently, as a nation, we are overweight and out of shape, we smoke and drink too much, we are in debt and disorganized, self-centered and stuck in a rut, living lonely and lackluster lives.

And it seems like we’re trying to tell ourselves that if we could not only make these resolutions but keep them, when we might just be people who laugh easily with friends and family, who exercise regularly and look terrific, who enjoy lives free of any kind of addiction, people whose lives run smoothly, who have plenty of money, who tutor kids at the local elementary school and take pottery classes on Thursday nights. In other words, we think could be people who live “the good life.”

So what’s my point? In what way is our list of New Year’s resolutions connected to the book of Revelation and “the end times?”

It’s simply this: In the same way that when we talk about who we wish we could be we are actually describing *who we are*, when we talk about “the End” we are actually also talking about *who we believe God is*.

Do we think that our God is watching the “Rapture Index?” Sitting up there saying, “Just give me one more reason, people... one more reason, and I’ll unleash the four horsemen on you”? Do we think God’s just waiting for the index to hit 195 and then it’s all over — the rapture will take place and the end of the world will unfold just as the “Left Behind” series predicted?

What we ultimately believe about “the End” is in itself a statement about who we believe God is.

Writing on his little island of exile at the end of the first century, John of Patmos gives us a glimpse of God’s final plan for creation and, at last, the fulfillment of his kingdom.

John was a prophet and a prisoner. In the darkest of times, the two often go together. Because he refused to bow down and worship Rome and call Caesar Domitian “Lord,” John was banished from Ephesus and imprisoned on an island named Patmos.

His fellow brothers and sisters in Christ — whom he had to leave behind — were in great danger. If they refused to bow down, they too risked persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

Isolated in his exile, John is consumed with terrifying questions. Why is Domitian so powerful? Why does God allow forces of evil to be so strong? Why does God let evil persons prosper and good persons be persecuted? Who is actually in control? Who will win out?

In response to those questions God gave John a story. It came from visions brought by an angel. It is a wild, fantastic story filled with terrifying animals and mysterious persons, glimpses of heaven and hell, the darkest of darkness and eternity’s own light.

The story operates on two levels:

On the first level it is a survival document for a persecuted church. Full of provocative symbols and disconcerting imagery, it is God’s message to the downtrodden. Evil will fall, it says. The will of God will prevail, it says, even if it doesn’t seem like it right now.

Unfortunately, this mode of interpretation has often times displayed the rather uncharitable habit of assigning absolute evil to one’s earthly adversaries. The Antichrist, the Beast, and the Dragon of Revelation have been identified throughout history as: the Pope, Napoleon, F.D.R., the Soviet Union, and even Ronald Reagan. Each of his names, Ronald Wilson Reagan, contains six letters — “666!” And this mode of interpretation has often celebrated in the “Tribulation period,” in which the enemies of God and unbelievers will suffer while believers are whisked away in the so-called Rapture.

The problem with this whole model is that it seems so far removed from the spirit of Christ, who is supposed to be the center of the book.

At another level, a deeper level, the book of Revelation is a book that reaches to a region deeper than the conscious mind, a level of archetypes and symbols where God still walks with us in the cool of the day and the forces of good will not be defeated; that God will win the final victory and *that there will be a final healing of all things* (H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories*, 305-306).

That is where we find ourselves in the story today — the part where there is a final healing of all things:

“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; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away 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.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” (Rev. 21:1-5).

One of my favorite places in the world is the upper canyon of the North Platte River. It’s where I grew up camping and fishing, and where I return as often as possible to camp and fish.

Two summers ago, a massive wildfire roared up that canyon, closing it off from any human activity for the better part of five months. Propelled by high winds and dry conditions, the fire burned up the steep walls of the canyon, tearing through the pine trees and aspens. Animals tried to flee the canyon, but many were killed. The daytime was filled with a choking smoke that burned the eyes. At night, you could see an eerie, orange glow emanating out of its mouth. It looked like a scene from the apocalypse.

Then last summer, I spent the first two days my sabbatical floating, fishing, and camping that section of the canyon — just one year later. As my fishing buddy, Kyle, and I rounded the corner to the first big burn, I was at first dismayed at the damage. The trees all the way up the canyon walls were burned to a crisp — quite literally — and now stood there leafless and limbless, like blackened matches against the sky.

But there was another reality, too. Just one year after that devastating fire, anywhere the trees had burned, the canyon wall was absolutely covered in lush green grass. Those arid Wyoming walls were green like the hills of Ireland. I’d never seen such green grass in that part of the world. Even though the fire had been destructive, new growth was springing to life quickly. Call it the circle of life, call it nature’s way of garbage control. But to this pastor, it felt like it should be called, “Resurrection Valley.”

In our passage this morning, we see a God who wants to make all things new. We see a God who doesn’t want to snatch his creatures away from a broken world, but one who’s work is, at heart, one of *renewal*.

This isn't the story of God throwing it all out and starting again. Nor is it the story of a God who wants to make "all new things," but of a God who wants to make "all things new."

Contrary to popular apocalyptic thinking, which touts an "evacuation theology," there is no rapture of Christians from earth to heaven in Revelation. Instead, according to this passage, it is God who is "raptured" down to earth to take up residence with us.

The Greek text actually says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the *tent* of God is among mortals. He will *pitch his tent* with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them."

No longer transcendent and set apart, in this new reality there will be no need for a temple or a cathedral or a church or a sanctuary, because God's tent will be right next door.

John also says that there will be no sea. Why? Not because the ocean is bad, but because in the symbolic world of Revelation, the sea is the place from which the dragon, or evil, comes. In this new heaven and new earth, no more sea means no more evil.

And with God here and evil gone, there will be then no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. This is a reality ruled, not by what's wrong in the world, but by what's right with it.

Do you hear what I'm saying? God isn't looking to wipe the slate clean and start all over. God isn't in the business of undoing, but in the business of renewing.

Revelation is ultimately the story of a God who will make all things right — even those things that we put on a list every January 1 and wish were right about us already. Our God stoops down and meets us where we are, and not necessarily where we're supposed to be.

It's been about three and a half years since Christen and I adopted two Weimaraner puppies. At the time, one was 6 months old and the other was 11 weeks old. We had never done puppies before, and we were in for a rude awakening.

Over night, our lives changed dramatically. It was now spent policing bathroom trashcans, because apparently used Kleenex tastes delicious. Christen and I were now up multiple times each night for potty breaks, though only rarely for ourselves. And even with those late night potty breaks, the brand new carpets in our home were all thoroughly broken in. Not even our trees were safe. They chewed the bark off several of them, convincing us that they're also part beaver.

It was during that time that I began to understand why God made puppies so dad-gum cute – because if they weren't, you'd murder them. But we fell in love with them nonetheless.

When Cooper was little-little, he was terrified of the dark. No joke. Have you ever heard of a dog being scared of the dark? So when he'd waked up in the middle of the night to shake out, and it would be dark, he would get scared. It was so bad, that we bought the dog a night-light. I slept with a night light. I hadn't done that since I was 7 years old.

But sometimes, even that night light wasn't enough. So, when he'd wake up, he'd come over to my side of the bed and whimper until I woke up. And when he'd wake me up at two in the morning, I didn't push him away and say, "Leave me alone. I've had enough of you." I didn't hit him and say, "What were you thinking waking me up? Don't you know I have to preach in the morning?! I wish I'd never adopted you!"

Instead, I would roll out of the comfort of my own bed, I would wrap up in the old blanket off the floor, and I'd lay down on the ground next to him to make sure he could get through the dark night.

In some small way, I think that is also an accurate image of our God, who when its all said and done will stoop down to where we are on our journey and comfort us, even if it costs him.

*"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away 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."*

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

*That is who our God is.*

Amen.

Julian of Norwich:

All shall be well,  
and all shall be well,  
and all manner of thing shall be well. Amen.