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A New Heaven and a New Earth (Revelation 21.1-6)

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The writer of Matthew's gospel tells us that 'when Jesus came up out of the waters of his baptism, the heavens opened and the Spirit, in appearance like a dove, came through the opening and descended on him. The sight was accompanied by the sound of a voice, also out of heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3.16-17)'. The same story is repeated in Mark and Luke, with minor variations. All agree, writes Eugene Peterson, that 'The opening of the heavens ... is the opening of Jesus' ministry on earth'.¹ And this metaphor of the heavens opening seems to signify two things. On the one hand, something new is afoot – divine life is breaking into earthly life in a new way. The realms of finite and infinite are, in this moment, opened to each other, more freely communicating. At the same time, we come to realise that what seems like something 'new' is actually what has been the case all along. In the words of Peterson, 'Beyond and through what we see there is that which we cannot see, and which is, wondrously, not "out there" but right here before us and among us: God ...'.² The veil is pierced. What has been hidden is revealed, 'heaven in ordinary' as the poet George Herbert puts it.

The whole of the Revelation to John issues from this acute perception of eternity touching and suffusing time. 'After this I looked', writes John in chapter 4, 'and there in heaven a door stood open!' And in fact, John experiences himself invited not just to look into heaven through the open door, but to enter in: 'And the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (Rev. 4.1). In the spirit, it's as if John enters the inner dynamic of the world's meaning, the unfolding of divine purpose. And over the past three weeks, we've accompanied him – as he witnesses the worship of heaven and sees the whole of history, the whole of creation, centred in praise around the on One seated on the throne and around the crucified Messiah – the Lamb standing as if slain. We've accompanied him as he witnesses to war breaking out in heaven, evil vying with good at the heart of reality; he's

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & The Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p.168.

² Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p.169.

shown us Satan being cast out of heaven, yet not finally defeated, continuing to wreak destruction on earth. Until finally he sees the Rider on the White Horse with his robes dipped in his own blood (another image of the crucified Messiah) coming out from heaven to prevail over evil by the sword that emanates from his mouth, which is to say by power of God's Truth. And all this extraordinary vision has provoked us to wonder about the underlying dynamic of reality, about the power of evil and the means by which goodness conquers, as well as the question of nonviolent action in a violent world.

And now, at the culminating point of John's vision, he sees all things renewed: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth'. Peterson notes that in Genesis the biblical story began with a beginning, and now in Revelation it ends with a beginning too. 'The story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its last word'.³ But now, the creation is no longer threatened by de-creation for the sea, the ancient Scriptural symbol of chaos, 'is no more'. And this, Revelation would have us believe, is the happy ending that is God's meaning, and that is in God's power to fulfil. This is the ground of our hope. And before we dismiss it as wishful fantasy, too good to be true, let's take a closer look at its substance.

What's 'new' about the new heaven and the new earth? It seems to be to do with the final overcoming of the experience of separate realms. That is, at the end and renewal of all things, there is coinherence of heaven and earth, God and creation. 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them'. Austin Farrer writes, 'The kingdom of God comes on earth "as it is in heaven" and unites [humanity] to the Godhead'.⁴ In the new creation, as John apprehends it, we will be uninterruptedly present to God, the loving source of all life, which means that 'death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more'. This isn't a completely alternative universe. Already, here and now, we have glimpses of this coinherence. It's just that we don't yet inhabit it fully – it's not a stable reality for us. So Peterson writes: 'The vision of heaven is not the promise of anything *other* than what we have already received by faith'; it's its completion. And again: 'We have access to heaven now: it is the invisibility in which we are immersed, and that is developing into visibility, and that one day will be thoroughly visible'.⁵

³ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, pp.169-170.

⁴ Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St John the Divine: Commentary on the English Text*, first published Oxford University Press, 1964 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), p.211.

⁵ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p.172.

What's critical, though, is this promise isn't focused primarily on the state of individual consciousness. It's not just that some of us might break through the veil to dwell in a state of mystical union. In Revelation, the yet to be consummated coinherence of heaven and earth is described as the coming of 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem' (Rev. 21.2). This is a vision of corporate transformation, of justice and well-being founded on the earlier vision of the prophet Isaiah: 'For behold, I make Jerusalem a rejoicing and my people a delight ... and there shall no more be found in her the voice of weeping or the voice of crying' (Isaiah 65.19).⁶

And here's a striking thing. In this vision, rather than the renewed creation involving a return to the Garden of Eden or 'an escape to the country', it's precisely where humanity has most distorted God's image in itself that reconciliation is effected. Commentators point out that cities have a bad press in Scripture. The first city, Enoch, was built by the first murderer, Cain, and destroyed in the Flood. The second city, Babel, was built in an attempt to storm heaven and led to the confusion of tongues which divided humanity. In Revelation, the city of Babylon represents the total depravity and injustice of a humanity in thrall to the beast, while in the gospels Jesus lamented over the city of Jerusalem that consistently destroyed the prophets and stoned those sent to it from God. 'The city is what we tried to build but could not', writes Peter Llewellyn.⁷ So there's something here about the new creation not denying our human culture and striving, even though these have led us so often to be less than we're created to be. This is about the transformation, rather than the bypassing of who and how we are. The new Jerusalem comes down from heaven and yet is built on foundations inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles and entered by gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. This new city is a collaboration of grace and faithfulness, God and humanity, and a habitation for all.

In the elaborate depiction of this city that follows in the text, three characteristics stand out. The city is in the shape of a perfect cube – representing a vast extension of the cubic holy of holies designed for Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6.20) (L.117). It's thus a vision of symmetry and harmony, in which God is wholly present. For this reason, the city has no need of a temple, 'for the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb'. In other words, in the new creation, there is no longer any sacred/secular divide and no need of

⁶ See Farrer, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, p.212.

⁷ Peter Llewellyn, "The Unveiling": Reflections on the Book of Revelation as a Spiritual Adventure', February 2017 (Printed by the York Community Resource Centre), p.117.

priestly mediation, for the divine presence is immediate. And this means likewise that there is 'no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb'.

And finally, 'flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city', there is 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal ... On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month' (Rev. 22.1-2). Here is the reversal of the expulsion from Eden. In the Genesis story, on account of their grasping after self-sufficiency, God is conceived as expelling Adam and Eve lest they reach out their hands and 'take from the tree of life and eat, and live forever'. God even places 'a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life'. Now, though, a humanity reconciled to God and restored to its true identity through right worship, has free access to the fruits of this tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

The conclusion of Revelation is an astonishing piece of literary art, as well as an astonishing vision of all things reconciled and redeemed. It proclaims the consummation of intimacy with the ground of our being and an overflowing, abundant justice. David Neville points out that the collection of authoritative Scriptures for Christians 'begins and ends with visions of *shalom* (harmonious wholeness)'. These witness, he says, 'to God's will and purpose for the created order'.⁸ According to the Revelation of John, this *shalom*, grounded in the being of God, is at one level already accomplished. 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' (Rev. 21.6). At the same time, Revelation ends with a prayer for the Lord's coming, 'Maranatha'. It's not done; God's *shalom* is not yet fully realised on earth, and humanity is demonstrably not yet wholly reconciled to God, and nor in consequence to ourselves, each other and the rest of creation. Which leaves us ... where?

In the end, is John's purported Revelation just fantasy, the concoction of a fevered imagination refusing to accept the tragic and ultimately meaningless struggle of life on earth? On what grounds might we imagine it unveils anything and breaks through into truth?

Let me offer two final thoughts. Regarding Revelation's testimony that eternity touches and suffuses time, that an invisible reality of love undergirds and sometimes becomes apparent in the visible realm, this is a perennial theme in the contemplative

⁸ David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), p.218.

tradition. Martin Laird speaks of contemplative practice as the letting go of inner chatter and noise such that an inner silence begins to expand. This inner silence, he says, gradually opens into Silence [with a capital 'S'] – which is experienced as both a vast spaciousness and an awareness of a different quality of presence. 'If we turn within and see only noise, chaos, thinking, anxiety ... then we have not seen deeply enough into the vast and expansive moors of human awareness. When the wandering, roving mind grows still, when fragmented craving grows still ... a great letting go as a deeper dimension of the human person is revealed. From this depth God is seen to be the ground of both peace and chaos, one with ourselves and one with all the world, the ground "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28)'.⁹ 'This Mystery', he says, 'luminous and intimate, has kissed the lives of the great saints and sages of the contemplative tradition; they realise that this creating and sustaining Mystery is likewise the Light-soaked ground that is foundational to being human, foundational to light, life, and love'.¹⁰ This is the Mystery, the knowledge, into which our practice too is drawing us, opening to us – and as we are faithful to this way of silent prayer, we do come to know it for ourselves.

And regarding Revelation's testimony that the created order is fundamentally grounded in and oriented towards *shalom*, the peace and goodness of God – again, it seems to me there is no argument from the outside, no theory that can establish the truth of this claim. There's just the lived experience that when we act justly, peaceably and honestly, life flourishes; and when we are unjust, unkind and enmeshed in falsehood, it doesn't. What's truly generative and creative and re-creative in this world springs from the energy of love. And perhaps we'll never know if and how love does ultimately reign, unless we dare – in the midst of the struggle and pain of this earthly life – to enter through that door opened in heaven, prepared to be radically vulnerable to its presence and power.

⁹ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.23.

¹⁰ Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.25.