

**November 29, 2015 (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent)**  
**TEXT: Revelation 22:1–7 (Genesis 2:4b–17)**  
**TITLE: Advent Bookends—Creation & New Creation**

It used to be the every time you sang a hymn in church, it ended with an “amen.” It was just something you did—you’d finish the last verse and then two chords would be played. First would be a chord built on the fourth note of the scale, the subdominant, and then two of its notes would slide down to form a chord on the tonic or the first note of the scale. Now imagine singing a long hymn, all five verses of “Amazing Grace”, but when you got to the “Amen” at the end, the organist refused to play the second chord. It’s unsettling; it doesn’t feel right. Something inside us wants that chord to resolve. We don’t like to leave things hanging; we want what’s begun to be completed. This is a natural human instinct. It is true for music; it’s just as true for life and for faith.

The outer books of the bible—Genesis and Revelation—did not gain their locations in the canon by accident. The first contains a description of how life came to be long ago, while the second talks about life’s culmination at the end of time. Both use metaphors and richly borrow from the material found in the other books of the bible, but basically they form bookends describing for us the original creation that was and God’s new creation that will be. This is not just a literary motif. I believe this was done quite intentionally. Who would want to read the entire bible and not hear something hopeful about God’s realm to come? That would be like hearing only one chord of the great final “Amen.” I believe that history is not just a random series of events. As people of faith, we trust that God is active now in our daily lives and shaping history toward a future, God-directed goal. We are partners in this work; we have free will and responsibility and the sad capacity through our sins to mess things up along the way. But in the end, what will be is shaped not by chance but by God’s will; the first creation will in time resolve into God’s new creation.

When I re-read the story of creation found in Genesis 2, I’d forgotten how prominent a role was played by rivers in that story. In our modern world of faucets and running water, we forget how critical to life water actually is—and what a precious commodity it is. Yet there in the beginning, the first details to be described involved water—how there were no crops or plants to harvest until God caused a stream to rise up from the earth and water the land. Then dust was formed together to make man. Then a garden emerged—a place given to humankind as a gift and a home. And the source of this new life could be traced to a river flowing out of Eden to water the entire earth—a river whose four branches went out north, south, east, and west to water the known world.

Then in Revelation 22, after the new creation has dawned, an angel showed John another river—the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It’s a beautiful image and a humbling one. It reminds us that the crucial part of the first creation and the creation to come is not us, but rather

nature—water—a river flowing forth to sustain all life. Our pride and egocentrism may try to convince us otherwise, but scripture reminds us that God cares for all the world—human and non-human creation alike. That is why Christians have to be active ecologists. Protecting the earth is at the heart of our spiritual job description. To act faithfully involves caring about the ozone, about plants and animals and climate change. We need to worry about rainforests being cut down; we need also to worry about coral reef destruction, since reefs are the marine equivalent of a rainforest. Maybe instead of picturing heaven as a place in the clouds, we need to picture it as a place by a river—and remind ourselves that our capacity to care for the rivers on earth now may be the best test of whether we can be entrusted to care for the rivers of heaven in the creation to come. That would surely get some people's attention!

Now note where Revelation 22 says the river flows—"The river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God through the middle of the street of the city." Here's a dramatic change. Genesis had the first humans placed in a garden, cared for yet alone. Revelation speaks of the new creation as a heavenly city, an urban dwelling where we are all together. That's a biblical image we need to hear today. With all the current paranoia about foreigners, immigrants, and refugees, here's the bible telling us that we won't live behind security walls in heavenly gated communities. We'll live together; the new creation is an urban city.

Now, if we are going to talk about people of whom we should be nervous, I think we should be worried about the Canadians. Think about it: 90% of their population is massed within 100 miles of our northern border. They've infiltrated our entertainment industry with singers, actors and comedians indistinguishable from our American counterparts. And Canadians seem strangely immune to the cold. Something to think about.

I'd love to consider the current political paranoia as being a joke as unrealistic as fearing the Canadians, but something unholy and unbiblical is being expressed in the recent xenophobic rhetoric. A review of a history book about America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century pointed out the paradox that as our nation has become more socially inclusive it is also more economically unequal. We celebrate diversity yet we are also more politically intolerant of one another and more culturally segregated.<sup>1</sup> For too long our focus on heaven has been on St. Peter and the pearly gates. We've evangelized and proselytized and moralized to teach people what they need to do to pass a supposed entrance exam for heaven. Yet in the book of Revelation, the emphasis is not on high gates restricting entry. The heavenly image is of a wide-open, communal space – a city of God with the river of life flowing through it, flanked by trees of life bearing fruit each month whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

That last detail is particularly fascinating: leaves for the healing of the nations. It basically acknowledges that we are broken creatures, physically, emotionally wounded—and this woundedness will dog us all our lives. But just as we desire

resolution musically (with “Amen” cadences that are completed) we desire resolution historically. We want to understand things in the end. We desire to be made whole at last. And that is precisely what is promised us—trees that will feed us abundantly, feed us eternally (the trees of life) and trees that will heal us—not just us as individuals, but us and all nations. People from different traditions and from across arbitrary human borders will finally be brought together and healed at last. Earlier I asked us to imagine how our behavior would change if we thought how well we took care of rivers here on earth could affect whether we’re entrusted with tending the rivers of heaven. In the same way, how would we live together now if we believed that people don’t enter heaven single-file but only in large groups—in brotherhoods, sisterhoods, clusters of people lovingly reflecting the diversity of life as God’s shaping hand has evolved it around us? What would we do now differently so as to walk together into the city of God’s new creation?

I suggest that one surprising thing we can do is to keep gathering together in church. What is desperately needed now is the witness of the church. The world insists that history blindly unfolds one darn thing after another, like random beads strung together in an unholy necklace. The church instead tells a story about creation moving toward a new creation—lighting an initial Advent candle knowing other candles will follow it, believing that history is not random beads but rather pieces in a larger mosaic shaped by the artistic, loving hand of God.

The world insists that natural resources are commodities to be exploited and the fact that we have enough while our neighbors do not is just their misfortune. Here in church, though, we pause to give thanks for the gift of water and await a future river of life, one that flows now in baptism font promises poured over a baby girl’s head and one that will flow then in the city of God graciously, lovingly meeting everyone’s needs.

The world tells us to fear others, to protect our own at all costs, and answer force with more violent force. The church invites us into a place of healing, of prayer, of a gospel of peace. It is ideally a place where you don’t sit only by those who resemble you—it is not a place where you get to set the agenda, write the rules, and keep the spotlight on yourself like a permanent spiritual selfie. No, it’s a place where you share communion bread with people the world might not bring into your life but God chooses to bring around you; where you will hear prayer concerns no one would mention at your office but God chooses to lift from heavy hearts around you; where we step out of a private Eden and choose to dwell in a diverse city, because it is there that we see at last the face of God.

When we do church right within and without these walls—when we invite all inside, baptize, commune with and pray beside all God’s children—then God’s great “Amen” can finally be completed. It can sung now and sung again when the groaning pains of this long initial chapter of creation finally resolves into the new creation of God’s own making. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Kennedy, review of These United States by Thomas Sugrue; NYT Book Review, 11/22/2015, p. 27.