

May 19, 2019 (Bicentennial Sunday)

TEXT: Revelation 21:1–06, 22:20–21

TITLE: ELPC – A People of Hope

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

People keep getting things wrong about ELPC. They walk by and think we are a Catholic church, but we're not. They peek inside and imagine that only the very rich worship here, but that's not true at all. If they know we are a mainline Protestant church, they imagine that we are struggling—growing older, losing members, increasingly irrelevant in a post-modern, post-religion world. But we're relatively young—we're growing in membership—we're active in lots of relevant ways and outspoken on lots of important issues. Some people know us to be progressive in our theology and inclusive in our congregational life; therefore they think we do not take the bible seriously. But we do take the bible seriously. We read it, study it, reflect on it, grapple with it, argue with it, and seek to embody it in our daily walk of faith. People are often wrong about us.

Several years ago I came into the sanctuary and saw that a tour group of young students from a conservative seminary in western PA were being shown around by a professor, who, with barely suppressed indignation, pointed up at the large rose window in our East Transept and said, "And look there—in a Presbyterian church no less—a depiction of the Virgin Mary." As politely as I could, I interjected, "Excuse me, but that is not the Virgin Mary. It is the Bride of Christ, the church triumphant, as described in the book of Revelation."

Last week I mentioned how the top medallion window in the West Transept depicts a story from Acts 16, when the apostle Paul had a vision of a man calling him to travel from Asia into Greece—to "come over and help us." That window reminds us to be mission-minded people, who go to help, yet do so out of humility, seeking partnerships, trusting that God is already at work wherever we may go and with whomever we might meet. Across from that mission window is a glorious rose window representing the opening verses of Revelation chapter 21: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; 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 saying "Behold, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them and they will be God's peoples."*

Too often we get this passage wrong. Revelation 21 is commonly read at funerals. It is comforting with its language about a time when "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Perhaps we hear those verses and look up at the window, and think it is only speaking about some far future time—about life after death. But it's much more than that.

As soon as we hear language about heaven, we think of it as being the opposite of the earth—a time and place involving a total break between what is and what will be. We imagine a curtain being pulled back—a long tunnel being walked

down until we step into a new space, a new world, heaven. But that's not right. The voice in Revelation doesn't say "See, I am making all new things." The voice says, "I am making all things new." (E. Boring) All things—these things—new.

If the window is based on the book of Revelation, some may imagine it must be illustrating some place up in the sky, some heaven we'll ascend to in the sweet bye and bye. But there's no mention of the Rapture in the book of Revelation. Chapter 21 doesn't speak about going up to heaven. It says quite clearly heaven descends to us. How have we gotten so much so wrong for so long?

Today's a good time to ask these questions. Here we are—celebrating our church's bicentennial. We need to remember this with honesty and humility, acknowledging the indigenous people who preceded us and who were ill-treated and removed by our predecessors. Yet it remains true that two hundred years of worship has happened right here on the corner of Penn & Highland. Two hundred years of coming together: thousands of people, ten thousand Sundays, a handful of different sanctuaries culminating in this magnificent cathedral and these glorious windows. Today we ask ourselves: What will the next century hold? What shall we do now? Are we just supposed to sit around and wait for the hoped-for, coming Realm of God or are we supposed to be doing something while we wait? Spoiler alert: Based on what's in the other windows and what it really says in the book of Revelation, I think we're supposed to be doing something.

So let's start over. The bible begins in a garden—the garden of Eden. It ends in a city—a holy city coming down out of the heavens. Wait - the bible story ends with a city? Let's hope it's not Cleveland. (Sorry, that was a cheap shot.) No, but seriously—a city? Actually, it's a brilliant answer. Cities are places where people live together—lots of people, different people; not just one family or one tribe or clan. And cities work when everyone does something to contribute to its welfare. (Dana Ferguson) Not all the same thing—and not always in equal amounts—but everyone works together, contributes, worships, and seeks what is best for all.

Even better, God has pitched God's tent right in this city as well. God dwells in this urban place that is heaven-blest and heaven-sent. Where exactly is God? Well, there's no temple—no sacred hill or grove of trees. Yet God is close enough to reach out and wipe away tears, close enough to rejoice with us as pain, crying and mourning come to an end. God is as close as water pouring over us in baptism, as close as bread being torn off from a loaf and tasted by us in a shared meal. The peoples (plural) are together and God is in our midst in this heavenly, holy city. That's a big part of the message of Revelation captured in that window for this bicentennial Sunday.

There's one other detail that should also be mentioned. When John wrote this book, legend has it that he was in exile far from home. In fact, there's a good chance the author was someone who'd had to flee the old city of Jerusalem

when the Roman army came to town and destroyed everything—palace, temple, everything—during the war of AD 66-70. The phrase “a New Jerusalem” takes on a different meaning if your old Jerusalem is now in ruins.

The book of Revelation contains both words of comfort and words of warning. It tells of false gods and false powers. Game of Thrones may have Daenerys’ dragons, but Revelation has its own dragon—a symbol of an unholy quest for domination and unrighteous reliance on military conquest. Ultimately, though, Revelation warns us not to trust worldly powers or weaponry. To use Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, we are to disentrall ourselves from such things. They are the first things that have all passed away. Instead of Caesar on a throne, we are to worship the Lamb who died and rose again.

In this heaven-sent city of God, where God dwells and all things are new, the one on the throne says clearly, “These words are trustworthy and true.” Basically the promise is this: What must be, shall be. This is where the arc of history is heading. So how do we respond? We respond by working now for Christ’s peace, justice, and beloved community. Why? For one simple reason: if the present falls apart, the future also collapses. You can’t get to the future except through the present. The new heaven and the new earth are intimately connected to this heaven and earth, these buildings, roads and people. If we give into the fears that divide us from one another, the racism, xenophobia, and militarism, what city foundation will exist upon which the new Jerusalem can be built? If we accept politics as zero-sum games and international treaties as worth less than the paper on which they’re printed, what relationships will remain for the new covenant of God’s people of faith? If we destroy the environment, what flora and fauna will remain to sing God’s praise? If we refuse to love as Christ sacrificially loved—if we refuse to share the good news wind-blown by the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, what is left of our souls that is even worth saving? If the present falls apart, the future also collapses.

Which is why the words and images of Revelation captured in our sanctuary window are so important. The one who is our beginning is also our end. The God who created us in the garden comes to dwell with us in the holy city. The Christ who took on flesh and weakness and lived a marginalized life is the same Savior who embraces our fleshly weakness and broken existences to make all things whole. This time the heavenly voice doesn’t have to say “Be not afraid,” because there’s nothing left to fear. The old is gone; the new has come. The assurance is given to us: “It will be so. This is trustworthy and true. I am the Alpha and Omega.” That promise, that persistent, gracious love is what makes us people of hope able to serve God and God’s peoples today with confidence that will carry us into the years to come.

Honestly, there are many things people get right about ELPC. Over two decades ago, Bob Chesnut and Hydie Houston and others launched the name “Cathedral of Hope” for our church. It became an identifying description of who we are and

how we seek to minister. Lifting up the beauty of this space, it invites the community to come in and find hope in the good news of Christ. There are other things people get right. We are not going anywhere; we are committed to serving East Liberty and this area as best we can. We are not going to stop trying new things, because God is doing new things—look, do you not see it? We will sing prayers in Taizé, boisterously pass the peace to friends and strangers alike, and yes, even occasionally clap our hands to the hymns. We will strive to offer radical hospitality to all. We will go help in places where people are in pain, and speak out when too many others have fallen silent. We will be as generous as we can, because God loves a cheerful giver. We will make mistakes, because all sin and fall short of God's glory; yet it's also true that no one falls so far that God's grace cannot bring redemption. We will be much more than a building—more than a cathedral. Today and from now on, we will be people of hope—because by walking by faith in all we do here in the present, we prepare the way for God's future to come to pass.

And when people think that window is the Virgin Mary extending her blessing over our pews, we'll tactfully, gently say, "Actually that's from another part of the bible. Let me tell you about it. It's about a holy city—like the one we serve and in which we live. It's about a promise of God to be in our midst, even to the end of the age. Ultimately it's about faithful hope: hope for today, hope for tomorrow." We know a lot about this, don't we ELPC—O people of hope. Thanks be to God!