

Revelation 21:1-5

Easter 5C Midweek + May 22, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise Idaho
Pastor Ed Brandt
"Forever New"

Wouldn't it be great if everything could suddenly be new? That is, as long as the new items were just as dependable and user-friendly as what they replaced. I'm sure most of you would prefer having something that's new and dependable to something worn out and troublesome. There's excitement in having something never used before, something completely unspoiled. We want to keep things looking new for as long as we can. But an unavoidable characteristic of newness is that it is temporary. Despite all your precautions the new car eventually gets scratched and dented. Someone bumps your arm, the coffee spills, and the new carpet gets stained. Sooner or later the newness is lost. Our earthly possessions wear out, and so do our bodies. That's just the way things are in our fallen world.

But someday things will be different. In contrast to the present reality of deterioration and decay, the Apostle John in these verses from Revelation communicates to us a vision of how things will be after the Day of Judgment. In his vision John sees *a new heaven and a new earth*. He sees a vision of a new world where everything is forever new. This new world is not the result of some massive environmental project, or the triumph of science over disease, or even the result of mankind finally learning and doing God's will. This new world is the final result of Easter. A life forever new flows from Christ's resurrection victory over the forces that brought death and decay into the world.

John was well aware of how things are in the world. When he recorded God's Word in Revelation he had been exiled to the lonely island of Patmos because of his bold witness of the risen Christ. Using highly symbolic language, he records the visions given to him. He portrays the intense tribulation the Church will endure between Christ's ascension and His triumphant return on the Day of Judgment. John doesn't pull any punches. He vividly describes scenes of suffering and anguish as the Devil tries to destroy the church. Throughout the centuries the church has endured both violent persecution and also subtle but persistent attempts to weaken and compromise the truth of Holy Scripture. But John's vision isn't all gloom. He also reveals the glory of the exalted Christ in heaven and the blessed results of the Day of Judgment for believers. Because of this, his recorded vision encourages the Church to carry out her mission and to remain faithful to her Lord.

Through these words of Scripture, we can view with John the final result of the victory of Easter. The last fierce battle is suddenly over; the exalted Christ has returned to earth in triumph. Judgment has been rendered. The devil and all who belong to him have been thrown into the fiery lake of unending torture. Then John in his vision sees *a new heaven and a new earth*. Although it's difficult for us to imagine, what John described was probably not so unexpected to his first readers, for it is clearly foretold in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 65:17 the Lord speaks concerning the end times: "*Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.*" II Peter 3:10 provides more detail about these events: "*The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved.*" And verse 13 reads: "*But according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*"

But why must it come to this? With all our technology and ingenuity, can't we just improve on what we have? What makes this drastic destruction and re-creation necessary? The answer? Man's sin is the culprit. Human rebellion set in motion a downward spiral that even the greatest minds cannot hold back. Nature was only an innocent victim, a helpless bystander unable to prevent what happened. Just as the new car or the carpet does not itself cause the damage done to it, so also God's perfect new creation was scratched and stained by man's rebellion against his Creator. Recently we saw what happens when one person gets the flu. Soon the sickness spreads to the whole family. The fall into sin

was like an uncontrollable and deadly virus, a plague that spread over the whole earth. The whole creation was exposed and enslaved to a decay that leads inevitably to death. Completely reversing this inevitable decay is beyond the capability of mankind, no matter how much effort and expense we put into environmental projects and pollution cleanup. Only the Creator has the power to return creation to a state of perfection and newness.

A new heaven and a new earth--do we really believe God will do this? Or have we even stopped to think of the implication of these verses? We are so often preoccupied with the present reality that we don't reflect much on the future reality, other than to know that believers who die will immediately be in heaven with Jesus. In the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed we confess our belief in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. There's great comfort in that certain hope, but there's more to it than that. From Paul's inspired words in 1 Corinthians 15, which we hear at the graveside, we understand our resurrected body to be similar to Christ's resurrected body. It will be a physical body; but imperishable, glorious, and powerful. In recreating a new heaven and earth God will make a place, a physical locality for our resurrected physical bodies. Just like our bodies, the earth too will be permanently renewed, no longer subject to aging, forever released from the consequences of man's sin.

What a fantastic and overwhelming series of events! Not only a new heaven and earth but the dead of all time raised to life. This awesome display of power at the Last Day overshadows even the wonders of creation in the first six days. Can God do it? Of course He can. He did it in the beginning and He'll do it in the end.

However, the really important question of the new heaven and new earth is not where or what or how, but who. The essential feature of the age to come is the presence of God with His people. The Holy City, the New Jerusalem, in our text is the Church, the Bride of Christ, all believers in Christ from throughout history. Just as a radiant bride processes down the aisle toward the waiting groom, so the Church comes down from God eagerly anticipating a life forever with Christ. Her beauty is dazzling but it is not her own. It is a borrowed beauty, received as a free gift from God. Through the cleansing washing of Baptism, she has been made holy and blameless, fit for Christ her husband.

United with Christ in His sacrificial life and death, through faith she receives the gracious gift of new life. All the ugliness of her past sins is left behind as God in His grace clothes her with the new wedding dress of salvation. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:17: *"So if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*

This end time dwelling of God among His people is the culmination of a long history. God has always made it His habit to live with his people. For Old Testament Israel His visible presence was made evident by a cloud of smoke covering first the Tabernacle in the wilderness and then later filling Solomon's Temple.

But the greatest manifestation of God's dwelling among His people came in the person of His Son. God was present, not in a vague formless cloud, but in the same real flesh and blood of His people. John writes of Jesus: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

In Jesus, God and His people live together in an unbroken fellowship that will never end. Sometimes people today long for an obvious display of God's presence, something like a spectacular vision or a miraculous healing, something to compare with the pillar of cloud filling the sanctuary. But that constant reminder didn't seem to help the Israelites. They continually turned their back on God. We have all we need. We have the Real Presence of the living Christ right now within the Church in the Means of Grace. Christ is with us and works mightily in the gifts He gives: His Word, Holy Baptism, and

the Holy Supper of His body and blood. By these gifts the Holy Spirit keeps us in the true faith until that day described in our text when we will experience His presence most completely.

When God comes to dwell in the midst of His people, the destructive effects of sin are banished forever. Our text describes it this way: *"God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."* The former things have passed away with the triumph of Christ. The victory is won and the new order is ushered in by Christ's resurrection. Thus the comfort which John proclaimed to his first readers is ours as well. As we live in days of similar opposition and uncertainty, we are not overwhelmed by our trials and difficulties. Just as when John recorded this vision, tough times are with us now and probably even increasing in the future. Certainly, death, mourning, crying, and pain are still a regular part of life. Our possessions wear out and our bodies wear out. Nevertheless, these results of sin are part of the old order and cannot take away the joy we have in our future hope. Our present difficulties are confined to this earth and will be completely absent from the new world.

Today we've received a brief glimpse of that future total fulfillment of God's promise to dwell with His people. This vision of heavenly joy experienced with resurrected physical bodies takes nothing away from the bliss departed saints are already experiencing in their souls right now in heaven. Really, new life with God takes place in three phases or three areas: Here on earth through the gift of faith, before the throne of heaven between our death and Christ's return, and finally in the new creation ushered in by Judgment Day. This end time vision is so fantastic it's beyond our power to comprehend. Yet we can believe it, for we have it on good authority. The One seated on the throne says, *"Behold, I am making all things new."* We have no reason to doubt; for in His resurrected Son He has already given new life to all who believe. And He said, *"Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."* We have experienced God's faithfulness throughout our lives, we trust the Word He has given us, so we look forward to one day being in His eternal presence where life is forever new. Amen.