

Sermon – December 5, 2021
“A new heaven and a new earth”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Revelation 21:1-4

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! How is everyone doing on this second Sunday of Advent? Before we look at this morning's scripture, let me open up the floor to anyone willing to share how they provoked or were provoked by another to love this past week. Just remember, don't embarrass anyone and don't share anything confidential. <> I was provoked to love this week by the people of Fairfield's response to the needs to help celebrate the life of Mary Louise Hann Alexander. I saw so many examples of people provoking others to love before, during, and after that service. I was also provoked in love by texts that came to me telling me people were praying for me. And I was provoked to love by the response I got from my Band members when I texted them asking for prayers for Rebecca as she was being taken to the ER on Friday morning and they responded with "praying." Anyone else want to share a moment of being provoked to love from this past week?

What time is it? 9:45 a.m. on December 5, 2021. There are nineteen more shopping days till Christmas. That is clock and calendar time. In the Christian year, which is a very different

time than the world's time, it is Advent, the season when we look for the coming one, and that is not Santa, but Christ. In our Communion service, there are words we say together each time we commune with Christ, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" The first two parts are places of comfort and are familiar expressions, but this last part, the return of Christ, is perhaps an unfamiliar aspect of those words. Christ will come again. Christ's return is the focus of the first two weeks of the season of Advent. It is the time when we anticipate the return of Christ. The last two Sundays of Advent move to the anticipation of the first coming of Christ and the beginning of the end of the present evil age. We seem to lose the emphasis that the ultimate time piece for Christians, the canon of Scripture, places on this yet-to-occur event, the return of Christ and the beginning of the Reign of Christ. We are now on the world's time, some 2000 years plus away from the resurrection and ascension of Christ to heaven, and we wonder, "Will this last step, the return of Christ, ever come?" Let me read from 2 Peter 3:8-9 this morning: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." Peter makes a point that we should keep in our minds that in God's time, the correct time, it has only been a couple of days since Christ sat down at the right hand of God. And God is waiting patiently for the full number to come into the kingdom of God before the return of Christ occurs. And for those of us with loved ones who are not part of that kingdom, we pray for God's patience that those we love might be included in that number.

Those of us who have worked in large corporations and organizations may recall what I fondly call the "latest business theory churn." These were ideas that somehow caught hold in leadership and became popular, top-down movements with books written about how following these new ideas will solve all the problems of any business leading to success. I will not list these theories this morning, but will say that I do have a green belt, and will leave it at that. During the 90s one of these theories advocated creating vision and mission statements that could be used to drive a business into a central focus for success. And in response, I got to spend a lot of time developing vision and mission statements. And to my surprise, the church, or at least the United Methodist Church I attended, picked up this theory and decided the church needed a vision and mission statement. And so began a lot of activity within the church to develop it. The odd thing for me was that the way the church tried to implement this business theory was first by switching

the definitions of vision and mission from what industry was using. Now I will say a lot of people spent a great deal of time diligently working on these concepts, but in the end, those ideas found their way to shelves to be occasionally pulled out to make some point. So, I have spent many years with a vision statement that I did not grasp, put away on a shelf waiting for the Holy Spirit to bring me understanding of how vision and mission fit in the context of the church. I picked up this idea of a vision statement not too long ago when a speaker I was listening to made the statement that “Revelation 21:1-4 is the church’s vision statement.” In fact, it is “The Vision Statement” for the body of Christ. And as I reread this scripture in light of his statement, I had a moment of understanding about vision statements for the church, and what the vision of the church was became clearer to me. I began to get it. This is the vision of the church universal. This is what we are all seeking in all of our ministries. In all of our striving, in all that we do for Christ, we are seeking to see “The Vision” come to pass.

It is a vision that brings us hope and keeps us from despair in this present evil age. This is not a vision that speaks to humanity finally fixing everything by having gathered enough wisdom to address all of the evil of a fallen creation. This is God bringing forth a new heaven and new earth. The sea is gone, and all of the chaos that the sea represents in our lives is gone. And a new city, the new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven, not made with human hands, but made by God. This holy city’s beauty is so glorious and beyond our ability to grasp that John can only describe it with the most beautiful image that he knows that will be familiar to us, the beauty of a bride prepared for her wedding. John cannot describe for us the glory of this city that is coming in The Vision, as he has no words to use to describe that glory. John can only tell us what will not be there, no death, no pain, no mourning, or crying. All of these things that we experience in this present evil age from the injustices to physical hurt to evil situations such as human trafficking will not be present in this new place. God will be among His people and all of the first things of the present evil age are absent. That is a vision that we just need to sit with and think about, letting it sink in and trying to grasp what living in such a place and time might be like.

Let me read a passage from Luke in which Jesus talks about The Vision. This is Luke 21:25-28. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when

these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” The signs Jesus speaks to are the coming of God, undisguised, as CS Lewis describes this coming moment. People will be confused. They will faint in fear as God comes in full glory unveiled, bringing a new creation, and all of the power of the old heavens will be shaken. Those who are asleep, those who do not share The Vision, those who are unprepared will faint, as the terror of this event fills their hearts. But notice what Jesus tells those who are his followers. Those who know Jesus, those who have studied the Word made flesh, those who love God as Jesus loves God, those who love their neighbor as themselves, those who are followers of Jesus are not to be terrified, faint, and fall to the earth in fear. Instead, we are to stand up and raise our heads because redemption is drawing near. Those who are awake will have no fear, but will see Jesus coming in power riding on the clouds. Those who are awake will stand up, raise their heads, and be filled with joy at the sight of the coming of the Lord, at the arrival of the one they love as their redemption draws near. When the end comes, God will come to us unfiltered; no tabernacle or curtains or walls will shield us from beholding God in all of His glory. Those who are awake will stand up and lift their heads and behold the glory of the risen one in never ending joy. The one we anticipate in the season of Advent comes, and the moment The Vision is fully realized finally arrives. Until that time, we are to be at work in this in-breaking kingdom that overlaps with the present evil age, striving to join with Christ so that we may be conformed to his image and the full number of people may come into this new kingdom that finally will be fully realized.

Let me suggest that in response to The Vision that we mark these verses in Revelation in our Bibles, and we take time this week to read Revelation 21:1-4 and let The Vision begin to become more fully our vision. Let the words of scripture wake us up and change us that we might catch hold of the hope that comes with the return of Christ in power, and let us awaken fully to Christ’s coming return and wake up to what The Vision means for us as followers of Christ, those who are expecting that Christ will come again. Plan to use some of the time we surrendered to Christ last week during this week to read The Vision and let the Holy Spirit lead us into new understanding of the church’s vision statement. And also, in response to The Vision, this morning, let us come and commune with Jesus. Stand up as you are able, lift up your heads, and come and meet Jesus at his table. Come and experience firsthand, fresh this day, the mystery of being with Jesus as the gathered body of Christ in this place through the Holy Spirit. Let us

come not with just an understanding that Christ has died and that Christ is risen, but anticipating that Christ will come again.

Pray with me: Father God, we thank you for The Vision you have given us for hope. Lord Jesus, come and wake us up that we might commune with you at your table and then go forth to all the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to join you in your mission to all people that we may be laborers in your ripe harvest and prepare your people for your coming. Amen