

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5  
Intern Pastor Ken Staib

I don't know about you, but there are times when I dread turning on the evening news. Sometimes it seems like all the news is bad news. The same is true when I open the front part of the newspaper. Just one look inside the front page of the Chronicle reveals all kinds of bad things happening across the state, the nation, and the world. Just stop and think about what has been going on around the world lately: Roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, subway bombings in Europe, pirates off the coast of Somalia, threatening words from the leaders of Iran and North Korea, and a close call in New York's Times Square. Not to mention natural disasters like the volcano in Iceland, earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and Mexico, and severe flooding in Tennessee. I know there are people who avoid the news altogether, and sometimes I can't really blame them. All this bad news can make one pessimistic, and even cynical. It makes us long to hear some good news. We hear such good news from the book of Revelation, the news that God will heal the nations.

The reality is that the world is a violent place, from the violence that we human beings inflict on each other, to the violence caused by the forces of nature. I think it is safe to say that our world has been a violent place for a very long time, in part because of who we are as human beings. We human beings are constantly striving for power, knowledge, and perfection. And that striving gets us into a lot of trouble. Just look at the stories in the Bible, such as the story of the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they were kicked out of the garden, and separated from God. Ever since that time we have been striving to get back what was lost, striving to return to perfection.

As human beings we are always striving, and that striving often leads to violent consequences such as war. Why are wars fought? Wars are often fought over land, natural resources, ideas, and power. For example, think about what happens when one nation has land

that another nation wants. One nation invades the other to get the land, and that nation tries to defend itself, calling on other nations to help if necessary. Without a quick resolution, the war spreads to neighboring nations. Another example is power. Someone thinks they can do a better job than the leader in power, so they try to take over. If they go about it in the right way, they can get the military on their side, and if there is resistance, fighting breaks out. Next thing you know, other nations are taking sides and war breaks out. The whole course of human history, from ancient civilization to the present, is full of war and violence. Even a conflict like World War II which ended in Europe 65 years ago did not bring an end to war in our world.

Violence also affected the early church. In the first century, the Roman emperor and his governors were clearly in charge. Then along came this movement of Christ followers. They refused to worship the pagan gods. They refused to bow down to Caesar. They followed the new and radical teachings of a man named Jesus who rose from the dead. The early Christians were perceived as a threat, and often faced persecution, both on a small scale within certain cities, and sometimes on a larger scale across the empire. For those facing persecution, *all* the news was bad. The book of Revelation was written for those who faced this bad news day after day. It offered a vision of hope in the midst of persecution. The book of Revelation also offers a vision of hope for us *today*, in the midst of a broken and violent world. It offers a vision of God healing the nations.

In last week's reading from Revelation we heard about the new heaven and the new earth. We heard about the holy city coming down out of heaven from God. This week's reading tells us more about this vision of the holy city. This vision is all about the *new* thing that God is doing. It is about the end of time when all God's purposes for creation will be fulfilled. It is different from the vision of the end that we sometimes hear in popular culture, a vision of God destroying the earth and taking the faithful to a faraway place. With the amount of violence we

see and hear about on the news, it is easy to believe that a time is coming when God will indeed destroy the earth.

But I have to ask this about such a vision of the end: Why would God want to end creation by destroying it? Why would God want to end creation by doing what we human beings seem so capable of doing on our own? It seems to me that the God who *loves* the world would do something different, something new.

The vision that we find at the end of Revelation is much different. This is a vision of something *new*, a *new* city. In this city there will be no temple. In other words, there will be no place of worship. Why? Because God's presence will fill the city. We will be in God's presence worshipping him continually.

In this city there will be no need of sun or moon. We won't even need lamps or streetlights. Why? Because God will be our light.

But it gets even better. The nations will walk by the light of this city, that is the light of God. And the kings of the earth will bring their glory into the city. The kings will come into the city instead of going out trying to take over land, trying to overthrow other kings, or marching off to war. They will follow God's light instead of following their own ambitions.

The gates of this city will always be open. Why? Because there will be no danger during the day, and there will be nothing to worry about at night, because there will be no night.

And now for the best part: Running through the middle of the street is the river of the water of life, and on either side of the river is the tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. The most powerful part of this vision is the presence of the tree of life on either side of the river. Recall the story of the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, never able to eat from the tree of life. The relationship with God had been broken. Now in the new city, the tree of life is present. Now the relationship between God and humanity

is restored. Now we are *all* able to eat of its fruit. Not only that, but all of the nations will be healed by the leaves of this tree. We are given a vision of the day when God will heal *all* of the nations. This vision is about *life* and *healing*, not death and destruction.

For the believers who faced persecution in the first century, this radical vision of the future gave them hope. They were given hope that someday things would be different, that in the end God would overcome all that was broken in the world and bring forth a new creation in which God will be at the center. This vision gave them hope and helped them to persevere.

This vision also gives us hope in the midst of a world that is still broken. It gives us hope that someday all of the presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and dictators will enter the new city. It gives us hope that someday the night of war, genocide, persecution, and car bombings will be no more. It gives us hope that someday the gates will always be open and there will be no need for bomb detectors at airports, barbed wire fences at national borders, or stockpiles of nuclear warheads pointed at each other. It gives us hope that someday God *will* heal the nations.

When will this all happen? I don't know, but I wonder if maybe it already is. If we look around we have already been given glimpses of what it will look like when God heals the nations. If you watched any of the Winter Olympics in February you witnessed athletes from around the world competing peacefully in Vancouver. A month ago in Prague, the presidents of Russia and the United States signed a nuclear arms reduction treaty, the first such treaty in a long time. In January, after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, nations from around the world sent rescue teams and supplies. When God heals all of the nations there will be no more war, no more striving for power, no more persecution, and no more violence. When God heals the nations mothers will no longer have to send their sons and daughters off to war.

When God heals all of the nations you will turn on the news, and there will be no bad news. Imagine if you turned on the Today Show to hear that there is now just one Korea. Imagine if the latest breaking news on CNN was a report about Israelis building homes for Palestinians. Imagine if CBS Evening News reported that every nuclear weapon on earth had been deactivated. Is this all a dream? Perhaps, but I think even these would be mere glimpses of what it will be like when God's purpose are brought to completion. And the more I think about it, when this does happen, I don't think there will even be any news to watch, because, no matter how good the news is, nothing will compare to fully experiencing the presence of God.

Amen.