

## Sermon: Until Kingdom Come

Year C, Easter 5

[Acts 11:1-8; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35](#)

Offered April 24, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

There is a moment in everyone's vacation, where we say, "This is like heaven." At least I hope there is. For me, I was standing on the Philosopher's Path in Kyoto, Japan a world almost alien to me, you couldn't have been further from New England than I was there, and yet it spoke to me. It was so beautiful. But beautiful in the way that things are beautiful when humanity and nature work together. It was a good reminder to me that God really is everywhere, including among the falling cherry blossoms while young teenagers troop along in rented kimonos taking selfies.

Thank you for giving me the time to go and be renewed there.

So think back over your vacations. Where were you when you were tempted to say, "This is like heaven." [wait for responses] So all those places, all those moments. And if we picked just one, we would still have hundreds of details. And there are thousands of those kinds of moments.

There have always been thousands of those kinds of moments with hundreds of details each. In every age, the description of heaven has changed to mirror the times. Some might argue that the image in today's reading from Revelation is just another one. But it's worth taking a closer look, because the image from Revelation is not trying to describe what heaven is like. The passage from the end of Revelation is *describing* heaven. Not what it is *like*, but what it *is*.

It is here, on earth. (Revelation 21:2) It is not somewhere else that standard issue humans can't go. It is here. It is a city, because cities work best when people depend on each other.

(Revelation 21:2) Remember that when this part of the Bible was written, Brookline would have been considered a city. So you don't need to imagine New York or Tokyo.

It is home of God, living with mortals. (Revelation 21:3) God will be with us, wiping away every tear. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. (Revelation 21:4).

When it describes this world that the New Jerusalem is coming down into, it says that the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. (Revelation 21:1). That hits our ears strangely, because our understanding of the ecological cycles life depends on rely on the sea. We need the sea as part of the water cycle. We need the sea to store carbon. We need the sea to heat the air in winter and cool it in the summer.

Think back to Genesis. All the way back to the beginning, when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of ... the deep (Genesis 1:2). That is where God begins creation, by sending a wind to sweep over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:3) The first earth is called out of the chaos of the sea by God. The sea is chaos. The surface hides who knows what. Creatures come spiraling up. Storms roar in. So what disappears in the new heaven and the new earth is chaos. The sea is no more.

The sea is no more, death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Chaos is gone in the vision being laid out in Revelation. God is with us all the time, no barriers, nothing between us and God.

Think for a minute. It doesn't say anything about good food or seeing the ones we've lost or about golf drives that go 400 yards dead straight down a fairway and stop on a dime. Because it

doesn't need to. Revelation is trying to put a very carefully curated vision of what it will be like when the Kingdom Jesus talked about for so long finally arrives. John of Patmos could have articulated hundreds of details about the new heaven and the new earth. He certainly included hundreds of details about the destruction of the first heaven and the first earth.

Instead he reminds us of the two basic elements of the Kingdom: chaos will be gone, God will be here. Everything else flows from that. It's so simple a vision, but it's one we can use again and again. Because when we are back on our heels, when we need something to pull us back into the fight against the world's indifference, against the brutality and stupidity of the world we live in, we are probably overwhelmed by chaos or feeling God's absence most keenly. Think of all the moments you have said to yourself, "this is hell." [Pause] No one can know what those moments were, but there was chaos and there was a feeling that God was somewhere else. The emergency room, the police station, the side of the road, the principal's office, the boardroom, the chemo clinic, the political rally. All places of desolation will offer glimpses of the new heaven and new earth if we can just remove the chaos and find the presence of God.

But John of Patmos talks of this new heaven and new earth as something he sees in a vision, something that is not yet here. He describes it to give us comfort and hope of what is to come. Today's reading from the Gospel of John, describes something that is here now, available to us today.

In today's reading from John, (just to be clear: the Gospel of John was written by a different John than the one who wrote the book of Revelation), in today's gospel, Jesus is talking to his inner circle. Jesus has been talking with them for a long time as they travelled from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south, talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God. They have walked the length and breadth of Israel, and they have healed and taught. There have been massive crowds and intimate dinners. Just before this passage, he has shared bread and wine with them asking them to remember him each time they eat and drink. Judas has just left, on his way to betray Jesus to the authorities, in his own way bringing more chaos into the world.

So it is time for Jesus to summarize what he has been working towards all along. He speaks of glory, of how the Son of Man, Jesus, has been glorified and God has been glorified in him. Glorified. Glorified! Glorified is when you're famous and on TV and rich and important people ask your opinion and teenagers copy your hairstyle and you have your own line of sneakers. Glorified is when your car is a sweet ride and not a car, when you have a cooking show when you can't cook, when thousands of people follow your every tweet and you have more friends on Facebook than live in Wyoming. That's what glorified meant then and that's what glorified means now.<sup>1</sup>

And yet Jesus has broken bread with his betrayer. Jesus' arrest will come in a few hours, then his death on the cross. That's not glory, that's humiliation. And yet to save us, to bring the Kingdom where chaos is gone and God is with us all the time, Jesus transforms earthly glory into divine compassion.<sup>2</sup> That's the source of all Jesus' teaching, his compassion for us. When he speaks of glory it's not the kind of glory you need an agent for and a team of lawyers to defend

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, "Fifth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, John 13:31-35" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 469.

<sup>2</sup> Troeger, 473.

the use of your image. That compassion has been there all along and hangs tangibly in the air in this moment.

Picture the people he's speaking to: they are fishermen, tax collectors, farmers. They're tough guys who have earned their livings with the strength of their backs and their ability to endure in the real world of chaos where God feels absent much of the time. Big shoulders, rough hands, feet that can walk for miles in the sun. And what does he call them? "Little children." They couldn't be many people in Jerusalem that night that were less like little children. But Jesus has that much love for them. He uses a term of endearment they wouldn't have heard since they were tiny.

With his love for them hanging clear in the air, he tells them "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Another translation of that commandment is "I have loved you *in order that* you also love one another."<sup>3</sup> Why do we love our little children? Not because they should love us or they should love one another, but *in order that* they love one another, we love them to make their love for one another possible.

If we can do that with earthly compassion, imagine what can happen with divine compassion. The New Jerusalem can come down to this earth. God will live with us, here. Chaos will be no more. Jesus loves us in order that we love each other. That love eases the sharp edges of chaos. That love lets us feel the presence of God in each other. We become Jesus' disciples not because his love placed some obligation on us. Jesus' love makes it possible for us to love one another. Until chaos is no more. Until God is wiping away every tear. Until Kingdom Come.

---

<sup>3</sup> Troeger, 473.