

**MT. ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH**

May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 / 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter

*Revelation 21:1-6*

**‘WHAT WILL HEAVEN BE LIKE?’**

Pastor Steven L. Neumann

‘Daddy, what will heaven be like?’ I remember asking my dad that question when I was little after a dear uncle died. I imagine that all of us have asked that question of someone at some point, & had others ask it of us. In today’s sermon text, God gives us His answer.

Today’s text is from the final scene in a glorious vision given to the aged apostle John who was in exile on an island for preaching about Jesus. In it, John is given a glimpse of the Paradise home of heaven that awaits God’s children. John describes that eternal home as *‘a new heaven & a new earth.’*

‘Why do we need a new heaven & earth,’ some might ask? Because sin has corrupted God’s beautiful creation. After the fall into sin, God’s curse was announced not only on the serpent, not only Adam & Eve & their descendants, but also on creation itself. In Romans, God tells us: *“For the creation was subjected to frustration - not by its own choice, but by the Will of the One Who subjected it - in hope that creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay, & brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”* (Romans 8:20ff)

Yes, this world was tainted by mankind’s rebellion. Every day we see thorns & thistles overrunning our lawns & gardens, bringing sweat to our brow as we try to keep them at bay. Devastating natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, & floods ravage the countryside & can claim countless lives. We see hostility not only between people & nations, but also between mankind & the animal world. All those sad realities, & more like them, exist now in this world because of sin - the sin that our 1<sup>st</sup> parents not only infected us all with, but that they also infected this world that God had made to be perfect with as well; for sin wrecks all that it touches!

So, as a result, this sin-tainted heaven & earth is *‘going to pass away,’* John is told here. The Holy Spirit through Apostle Peter says: *“The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, & the earth & everything in it will be laid bare”* (2 Peter 3:10). Then will come a new heaven & earth, Peter goes on to say, as does Jesus right here to John in this text.

Jesus also says that in this new heaven & earth, *“There’s no longer any sea.”* What do you think that strange phrase means? Well, remember, John was exiled on the island of Patmos for preaching about Jesus; he was cut off by the sea from his pulpit, his home, his family & friends. Oh how often he must have stared at the imprisoning waters of the sea wishing he could go! So, it seems that Jesus is assuring him here that in the new coming heavens & earth, there will no longer be anything that will separate God’s children from loving fellowship with God & each other - what an uplifting thought!

In the Bible there are multiple references to the *‘heavenly Jerusalem;’* it refers to what we call the Holy Christian Church or all believers in Jesus as Savior, who will live with Jesus in heaven. Here John sees that communion of saints, those who die with faith in Jesus as their Savior, *‘coming down from heaven’* like a *‘bride beautifully dressed for her husband.’* The Holy Spirit through Paul uses the same picture in Ephesians 5; & there we learn that Jesus is the bridegroom, & His church, believers, you & I, are His bride.

What’s the bride’s beautiful dress? It’s the robe of Christ’s righteousness that covers believers’ sin-stained lives. Yes, our sins are cleansed in Jesus’ blood, which John was reminded of earlier in the vision.

Please note that the verbs used here are passive; that tells us that the bride didn’t dress herself - someone else *‘dressed’* her & prepared her for this celebration. That someone of course is God; He alone dresses people so they can be in heaven. I mean, He initiated the plan to forgive all sin. He sent His Son to carry out that plan; & Jesus came & lived perfectly & then became the sacrifice to pay for every sin. And God alone is the one who dresses people in the robe of Christ’s holiness, as His Spirit creates faith in human hearts. Yes, God gets all the credit for people being dressed & ready for heaven!

Next John hears a loud voice from God’s throne saying, *“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, & He will dwell with them. They will be His people, & God himself will be with them & be their God.”* The best part of Heaven is that we’ll be with God. We’ll see Him, not only with the eyes of faith like we do here, but in actuality; we’ll be able to touch Him & go up & physically give Him a hug – just think of that!

Then John hears, *“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* For in heaven, all consequences of sin: sickness, pain, sorrow, & sin’s ultimate curse: death, are all gone. They belong to *‘the old order of things’* - this sin-riddled world; but in heavenly glory, those enemies will never afflict God’s people ever again.

That’s the glorious future that awaits us as God’s children, thanks to the work of our Bridegroom, Jesus. That future became ours when God’s Spirit 1<sup>st</sup> robed us in Jesus’ righteousness by God’s gift of faith. The Spirit did that for us either at our baptism, or through us hearing the powerful gospel message of God’s Word; for God’s

Word is dynamite which busts up our sin-callused heart of stone so the Spirit can plant the gospel seed of faith there.

Now, as we travel this barren wasteland of sin, how blessed we are to know this glorious home with God awaits us. We anticipate with joy the day we'll be delivered from sin's affects. We look forward to being in perfect harmony with God. We can't wait to get our new, sin-free, glorified body (like the ones Adam & Eve had at creation). Think of it: no more arthritis. No need for glasses. No pills to keep blood thin, the pressure regulated, & pain under control. No upcoming surgeries. No more funerals or cemeteries! That's our Christ-won hope; that's our certain future, thanks to Jesus!

But not only do we have a new & more glorious future coming; but as God's forgiven children, we also have a new & more glorious present, as John finds out next. He hears: "*He who's seated on the throne said, 'I'm making everything new.'*"

The One on the throne is God Himself; & in this declaration from the throne, we're reminded of what direction our new life as a redeemed children of Christ is to be pointed in, as we inhabit this old, sin-corrupted ball of rock. So many today are fixated on making this world better; they focus on saving the environment, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, revitalizing run-down areas of towns, etc. Don't get me wrong; that's all wonderful! Those are all God-pleasing goals that God's thankful children should participate in, as they can, to thank God for the love & goodness He's rained down on us.

But those activities don't "make things new" in the way Jesus just described. For those works, & all other such pious actions done by well-meaning people, can't do 1 single thing to make any sinner new & righteous before God, or give them eternal life in heaven; they don't dress anyone in the only white robe that will allow them to join the eternal wedding celebration of the Lamb in heaven. Only God's work does that.

And how does He do that? Our text continues, "*Then He said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy & true.'*" God's Word is key; it's God's true & trustworthy tool to make people new. Its message of law exposes our sin (& our great need for help); its gospel truth of Jesus & His saving work robes us with the prized garment of faith necessary to enter the Lamb's heavenly wedding banquet.

Yes, all need to hear & continue to feed their soul on God's mighty Word. It's the key that unlocks heaven's doors. It's the spiritual food that empowers with God's strength to endure, until He calls & brings them out of this rotten place, home to Himself in that paradise glory. May we always continue to use that Word!

John continues: "*He said to me, 'It is done. I'm the Alpha & the Omega, the Beginning & the End.'*" God doesn't change; He was, is, & always will be the 1 true God. And as such, He's always true to His Word; all His promises are as good as done – as is the work to pay for every sin in Jesus' blood! We can trust Him!

Finally, God adds, "*To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.*" The thirst we all naturally have is a result of the sin we're born with. Sin makes us thirst for connection with God (like Adam & Eve had) – a connection we can't have in our sin-sick state; for God hates sin.

But Jesus satisfies that thirst. As Jesus told the woman at the well: "*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I give will never be thirsty. Indeed, the water I give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (John 4:13-14). The gospel good news about Jesus & His perfect life, death, & resurrection is the eternal-life giving water that quenches our spiritual thirst; & God continues to offer this water of life to all so they can drink & not die of the damning dehydration sin causes & we deserve.

As Jesus said in today's gospel lesson, His new command to His followers is that we '*love one another*' (John 13:34). We all know how often we have failed to do that, as we ought. So, repenting of that sin, & in appreciation to Jesus who has won forgiveness for it, we strive now to show that love daily. But we dare not simplify that command to mean that we're just here primarily to feed, clothe, or shelter the needy – as important as that love is; for all the fine food & the best clothes & homes this world offers can't get anyone into heaven! Only the trustworthy & true Word of God, which God calls us in love to share, does; only it is used by the Spirit to make people new, & to lead them to Christ, the stream of living water that will quench their spiritual thirst, wash their sins away, & spring up to life eternal with Him in Heaven. Yes, our main God-given mission as Jesus' followers is to love others in the most important way of all: by giving them the Savior Jesus in His Word.

May the sure hope of our Heavenly future secured for us by our Savior Jesus spur us on, make us strong to endure, & motivate us to carry out God's mission of sharing God's love in Christ, so others might share the same new life & glorious eternal future in Heaven with us & Jesus. – Amen.