

The Story of God and Us: Completion

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Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. Revelation 22:1-5 (NRSV)

We've been talking about the narrative we find in Scripture that the Bible is really a story, not just a book of laws or rules. It's a story of a relationship between God and us. And as we've been working on learning that story - you've probably received this booklet at home, and if you haven't, you can download it from our website. But I want us to focus on that whole story so let's say it together:

God created the world and everything in it because God desired a relationship with us. We have free will, and our SIN moves us away from God so decidedly that we cannot overcome the separation on our own. But God reaches out to us to overcome our separation by creating COVENANTS - agreements to take care of us that God will uphold no matter what.

Through the INCARNATION of Jesus, we were brought into the deepest possible intimacy with God. Jesus entered the world to lead us back into the harmony from which we had fallen away to ATONE for our sins on the cross, overcoming the powers of evil. Victory over sin and death was achieved when Jesus was RESURRECTED after the crucifixion. God dwells in each Christian to guide, strengthen, and comfort through the HOLY SPIRIT.

The Spirit assembled a community of believers to become the church that worships and fulfills God's mission: to inaugurate the Kingdom on Earth. One day God will COMPLETE the new creation. There will be no more evil or suffering, and everything in the world will be restored and set right.

You know, it may be hard for you to memorize all of that. Maybe you can just learn it and memorize the basic words of Creation, Sin, Covenant, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Holy Spirit, and now Completion.

Let's pray together. *O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So, I think there are two kinds of people. There are people when you set out on a trip you have a destination in mind, and you are headed right for that destination. Maybe you're like me, and you tell the family, "We aren't going to stop, we're just going straight for that destination." Or maybe you're the kind of person who says, "I don't know where we're going - let's just drive. Who knows, we can just drive around and look at stuff."

I'm not that kind of person. Those people may be able to live for the moment, and that's wonderful, but I think most of us are looking for some sort of purpose, some sort of direction. We want to know where this story is headed. What about you? Where do you think this is all headed - this story of God? This picture of God's creation? Where is it going?

I've chosen the word *completion* to describe how the story finishes. And I don't mean that like it ends, but it reaches its destiny, its destination, even though life continues.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite authors, wrote a book titled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. And that picture of fairy tale doesn't mean that it isn't true, but it means that it ends, and they live happily ever after. There is this picture that, in the end, things are finally fixed and made right.

We see this picture mostly in various prophecies throughout the Bible. But the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation is the revelation of St. John. It's probably written in the 90s A.D. at the end of the first century, either by the Apostle John in his very old age, or by someone we refer to as John of Patmos because it's written in a cave on the Island of Patmos. But it is a glimpse, a picture of pulling back the curtain to see what is ahead.

Now the truth is that it's full of all sorts of symbols and images and sometimes people will share with us that they know exactly what all these symbols and images mean. They sort of feel like they've been given this code and they can translate the code. But it's difficult to translate symbols.

I remember a number of years ago when the Emojis were first coming out on text messages. I shared with someone some sad news on a text message. I put in the little crying Emoji, and then I typed in *LOL* after I shared the bad news. I didn't realize that the little crying Emoji is laughing so hard it's crying, and LOL doesn't mean "lots of love," but it means "laugh out loud."

So if you don't have the context, if you can't distinguish the symbols, you can be misled.

But here's what I will tell you. I suspect that if you read enough of this, if we read enough of the prophecies in Scripture, if we read Revelation, and read Daniel, the apocalyptic literature, we learn about what we call *eschatology*. That's the "study of last things." And in those visions, there are certain themes that run through.

I don't know what your vision about how this all is supposed to end, but I hope that there are these themes, and I want to share five of them quickly. And I want to use Revelation 22:1-5, the passage that is our passage for today as kind of a skeleton to look at that and some other Scriptures about what are some of the themes are about and where this is all headed.

Here's the first. "Then the Angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month." (Rev. 22:1-2)

So, you have the river of the water of life, and you have the tree of life. The first theme is *life*. Resurrection, a physical life that is given to each one of us. The Jewish understanding is that life doesn't exist apart from a body, so resurrection means to *stand again*. This is the general resurrection when the dead shall rise. And we're all given new better bodies. That's an incredible picture of what's to come! That death is finally defeated.

I think about that when I think about my mother, who passed away in December. And in her last days, her body was frail, and she was in great pain, she had great confusion and anxiety. And she couldn't use a telephone anymore. I remembered how she used to be when I was younger when I was growing up, and she was a vice president of a university, and she had two assistants that she ran ragged. And she was so full of energy, and life and drive and ambition. That's what I look forward to - to that new body, that new life and even more. And on that day as our family likes to say, "We'll meet you at the Eastern Gate of the city of the new Jerusalem." That one day, we will all be together again. Life.

Here's the second theme. The passage says this, "And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:2b) This picture of healing is about healing in every aspect. It's about healing of our physical bodies, for sure. Listen to what the Scripture says in Isaiah 33: "Look on Zion..." Remember, Zion is the holy city, the new Jerusalem.... "Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem... And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick," the people who live there will be forgiven their iniquity." (Isaiah 33; 20, 24). Those that are lame will walk; those who are blind will see. We'll be healed.

It isn't just physical healing. It's more than that - it's the healing of relationships, it's the healing of the nations. Listen again to these prophecies from Isaiah 65. "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord." (Isaiah 65:21). Or in Isaiah 2: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Nations shall be healed; relationships shall be healed.

I was listening to a podcast called "This American Life." Many of you may listen to it. A couple of months ago, they had one called "One Last Thing Before I go." And in it, there is a story of a young man named Jonathan Goldstein, and his father and his uncle who were brothers have been estranged from one another for some period of time. For decades actually. Jonathan on Yom Kippur decided that he wanted to get his father, who's name was Buzz, and his uncle named Sheldon together again. And if he could help them to heal. He kept working with both of them, and both of them said, "I don't think the other one wants to. I don't really know if I really want to. It's never going to happen, and it's never going to work."

So, he just kept at them, and finally, he got his father Buzz to go with him to meet with his uncle Sheldon. They had a conversation, and they began to talk about what had happened, and all that had occurred in their childhood. Finally, it came out that when one was five years old and the other nine years old, their mother had left their father because the father had been abusive. And the mother had taken the five-year-old with her but left the older boy behind with Dad. The idea was the nine-year-old boy could handle it. And the pain and disappointment and brokenness and hurt were just so great, but they finally do come back together in this reconciliation.

Here's what Buzz, Jonathan's father, says to him as they're driving away, "Oh, my God, I feel so different now, you know that? I feel different, Jonny. I just feel so different. This has taken a lot off my shoulders, you know."

I wish it was the case that always happened here in this life. I meet with families to plan memorial services, and too often, there's a tension and brokenness in the room. I don't know about you. Are there relationships that are broken with family or with friends? Or with co-workers? Look, in the City of God that is to come, those will be reconciled. Those will be healed. This is real peace.

So first, is life, and the second is healing. Then the Scripture says this: "Nothing accursed will be found there anymore." (Rev. 22:3a). The third theme that runs through all the literature about completion is that there will be a final defeat of evil, and evil will be replaced with justice and righteousness. For example, in Revelation there is a dragon, and the Scripture is clear that the dragon represents Satan. It says so. And Satan is thrown out of heaven in a great battle with Michael the Archangel and is thrown to earth. And the battle continues on earth until finally the ancient dragon is thrown into the sea of fire forever and forever. Those are pictures and symbols, but the image is that one day that which is wrong, that which is evil, will be defeated and replaced by that which is right - righteousness and justice. It's in every one of the prophecies. And that the king shall rule with justice and righteousness.

A number of years ago I went with some folks from our church on a mission trip to Guatemala with Zoe Ministries. This group helps to develop work teams of young people to help them support their families. While we were there, we went to see a man who had been a carpenter, and he'd become disabled. His wife had left him, and I'm not sure, but I think that their son was nine or ten or eleven years old. And he was trying to help support his family, so Zoe Ministries had helped him to raise some chickens and also to have him join this team to help run a restaurant. It was to help him support his family. And I saw the father - I saw the pain in his face that he's not able to help support his son and that his wife is gone, and he was broken. And I saw this boy who's trying to support his little family there. And I thought, "This is just wrong. It is wrong that this should be this way. That I should have so much, and this should be this way. It shouldn't be like this. Something is broken and needs to be fixed." That's justice.

So that which is evil is defeated, and justice replaces it.

Let's look then at the fourth theme. "But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." (Rev. 22:3b-4) There's so much in there. The Throne of God is in the city, so that means there's no temple in the city, and there's no reason to have a temple. The temple was in the city, and that's where God lived in the Holy of Holies. And it was in there and in the sanctuary where God lived.

We don't need a temple or a holy of holies because God fills the entire city. It goes on: "...And they will see his face..." That means that they'll know God, they'll have a relationship with God. It says, "And his name will be on their foreheads."

So when I baptize a baby I put a mark on that baby's forehead, and I'll say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and it's a way of saying, "This child belongs to God."

Then it says, "And his servants will worship him."

Someone said to me once, "If in the future there's just like one unending worship service, I'm not sure that's really where I want to head." Some of you may think our services go on and on forever. Look, it's not talking about a worship service that goes on and on. It's a physical world that is being rebuilt and re-created, renewed. And that physical world will still need gardens tended, and people cared for and work to be done. The key is that all of those things will be done out of our love for God. That it will all be done as an offering of worship to God, that everything we do will be done as an offering of worship to God.

Look, this is the key. Remember the story - we're created to be in a relationship with God, and we've messed it up. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that relationship is restored. And it is completed; we are face to face with God. As Paul said, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, and then we will see face to face." This is the core of the new creation, this relationship with God.

Now there's one more theme. We have so far, life, healing with peace and reconciliation, justice with evil defeated, and justice and righteousness replacing it. We have the very presence of God in relationship and worship with God. And finally, the Scripture says this: "And there will be more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." (Rev. 22:5)

This is a picture of beauty. Look, it's just pointing back to the end of chapter 21, and it's so beautiful. It is a vision of the city of God. And it begins with an interesting picture of a perfect cube. Chapter 21:16 says: "The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia..." That's 1500 miles...." ...its length and width and height are equal." (Rev. 21:16).

This is a city 1500 miles tall. A perfect cube. The image of completion. Then it goes on: "The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and the lamp is the Lamb." (Rev. 21:18-23)

Wow! Incredible beauty!

I was in Colorado Springs a few years ago, and I stepped out of my hotel, and Pike's Peak is right there. I thought to myself, "I could live here." It was just a glimpse of God's amazing gorgeous power. I can step into a beautiful home. You know those beautiful homes that you step into, and you think, "I know I'm not supposed to be jealous of the people who live here, but I'm jealous of them. This is so beautiful - I could live here."

I've told you before about a Mexican missionary who came to speak to us when I was in Sugar Land, and in the midst of our conversation after church, I got to talking to him. I made a comment about how in Mexico in the small villages many people are poor, but there is often a beautiful big expensive church in the middle of the community. And I was thinking that all the money it took to build that church could have been used to feed the hungry and the poor. And he looked at me, and he said, "You don't think that the poor people need beauty too?" I was just stunned. I hadn't thought of it that way. He said, "That's the place where everyone goes. It's their chance to experience that which is incredibly beautiful. And it's open to them all the time, they go every day."

This beauty that lifts up our eyes and helps us yearn toward that which is ahead.

So those are the themes. Those are the pictures. We don't know exactly what it looks like, but those key themes are where this story takes us. What does that mean for us today? What does it mean that that's where we're headed?

Once I heard Ellen Johnson Sirleaf speak. She was the president of Liberia, the first woman to be the president of an African nation. She was also a United Methodist, and that's how I was able to hear her speak. She was a member of the First Methodist Church of Monrovia, which is the capital of Liberia.

She said that when the missionary came to Africa years ago, they would tell those who lived there - and when she was a small child and rebellious at that time; she said they would tell us that we don't need nice houses, or nice fields or plenty to eat because we would get all that when we get to heaven. She said, "Well, I wanted a nice house and a great field and plenty to eat, so when I get to heaven, I'll feel at home."

I like that picture. See, we in the church empowered by the Holy Spirit are to be a part of the mission of God to renew creation. We're not going to finish the job, God will do that, but along the way, since Jesus inaugurated this kingdom of God, he has called us into that business. To do whatever we can along the way to build life, to claim and witness to abundant and everlasting life. To bring healing and peace and reconciliation. To defeat evil and work for justice and righteousness. To be an instrument of God's beauty. And most of all, to witness to people the amazing transformation that comes with a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That's the work we're called to do.

God began that, and God will complete it.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we stand in awe of how you are at work in the world around us. We confess to you our sin that has broken this relationship we have with you. And we praise you that in Jesus Christ, you have put it right again. We pray that you would use us now, use us as signs, foretaste and instrument of your kingdom as we look forward to the day when you complete what you started, and the new creation is brought to fulfillment. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*