

NOVEMBER 02, 2022, MIDWEEK DEVOTIONAL

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: REVELATION 21

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

BLESSED THOUGHTS: “THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF THE CHURCH”

Traditionally, on Good Friday, many churches focus on the Seven Sayings of Jesus which he spoke on the Cross. But there are Seven Other Last Words, the Seven Words most often spoken by a church that has decided to die:

WE NEVER DID IT THAT WAY BEFORE.

Now I myself have had problems with change. For instance, when everything switched over to computers, and I only had an electric typewriter, I found myself slipping further and further behind in productivity and in the sort of jobs I could get. I had to go back to a local high school and take the same courses their kids took, just to understand how to use those blinking things. Fast forward to my last full-time job, and I actually helped our County redesign their information storage program to make it more useful to mental health professionals. But all that change took a lot of hard work. Needed change always does!

Congregational leaders were often quick to put the brakes on any proposed changes. Allowing elementary age children to receive holy communion was a hard sell, as was pushing the altar out from the wall to make it free-standing. And don't even mention the three times we had to change our hymn books! I'm glad no one threw one of them at me! Allowing non-members to be buried with their family in our church cemetery took some major convincing, but that was easier than allowing women to serve on church council, and later, to be ordained. Becoming a church that welcomed gay and lesbian people took hard work, and not everyone was happy. One Synod lost a fifth of its congregations as a result (one of them was one I had served).

My biggest ministry failure came when I was called to a church that was on the skids (it had once been called "The Church of the Millionaires" but was now a white elephant that needed extensive repairs). I was told to fill up the building again, but every proposal I advanced was sabotaged, until they finally got rid of me and called another pastor, who also tried, but his marriage broke up and he had a nervous break down, and the church then closed for good. ALL BECAUSE REAL VITALITY REQUIRED DOING NEW THINGS WE HAD NEVER DONE BEFORE!

Which brings us up to today. My brother-in-law is a Pastor in Saskatchewan. His city church, like many others, is in decline. Covid 19 hastened the decline, but church membership has been going downhill since the 1960's. And a lot of pastors and members are discouraged. At The Urban I led the last in-person worship service in March 2020. I'd like to lead the first one when we reopen, yet Covid is still out there, deadly and silently infecting the most vulnerable. We all need what one writer called "Signs of Hope in the Thunders of Spring."

So, let's pull back the curtain which separates us from the Age to Come, and what do we see and hear? The Risen Lord Jesus is very busy designing new ways to heal people, to ease suffering, and to make our planet a lot more like heaven! No time for crying over what has been lost! There are so many out there who need the mercy and love of God!

Ah, but scared and anxious people are even more fearful of change, aren't we? So many things have changed in my lifetime that have added to the Pain, and with absolutely no Gain! High on that list I would include widespread obesity, growing drug use, and the mental health epidemic among children and youth. These changes are awful, and we need awesome, God-given new things. What will they look like, these new things Jesus is busily preparing?

Today's beautiful Scripture, which has comforted so many of us when read at funeral services for our loved ones, shows us what to look for.

1. Only death dies—not us! The day I wrote this there was a horrible mass shooting in Thailand, followed by news reports of devastation caused by Hurricane Ian in Florida. Gun violence and the climate abuse need to die, so that you and I and our loved ones can thrive! Anything that fights such death is good, even if we have to make radical changes to experience this.

2. Grief and loss are tended to! I'm seventy-nine, and every time November rolls around the loss of several wonderful people hits me all over again. At my age, there are so many wonderful people to miss. Every five years, they say, each of us experiences a major loss. We need each other to make it through those hurting times. Anything that builds up a more caring community is God-given, even if we have to find courage to try them.

3. Everyone who needs God is welcome here! Back in the 1950's in parks and at bus depots there were two drinking fountains, one for "white" people and one for "colored" people. Segregation took decades to overcome, and now another evil called White Supremacy is making a big comeback. But these tearing-us-apart-things come from Hell, not from Heaven! In God's kingdom, if you're thirsty for life, come to God and drink deep of the Living Water. Everybody is welcome. No labels like race, gender, age, disability, or wealth direct us to separate fountains. One God loves us all!

4. We can still trust in the Promises of God! Thing is, we could use a few more loud voices (I have one) to proclaim those promises! If it's in the Gospels, it needs to be in our hearts! So open your ears and rejoice in the Lord!

5. You know, though, what the biggest challenge God faces with his renewal program?
Making a new and better Person out of You and Me! It all comes down to this: the New Heaven and Earth comes, one renewed person, and one renewed church, and one renewed community at a time. If God has changed me for the better—this week—than this has been a lost week for me! I don't ever be one of those whose excuse for missing out on the work of the Creator is "We never did it that way before."

—written October 06, 2022