

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
6 Easter 2013

Revelatory Light

"In the spirit the angel carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God."

Even before moving to Seattle, and the sun's visible presence in the sky became so rare I had always loved the light; I was practically born a morning person who would rather be outside on a sunny day than doing anything else.

As a child, as soon as I was old enough, I was the one who mowed the lawn, washed my parent's cars, and did any outside chore I could find. So the sunlight and the beauty of nature has always been a place where God was very accessible to me; I have always found it easy to understand God's love as light; as the very essence of all that makes light so compelling to the human spirit.

For the last few weeks we have been hearing the sweeping poetic vision described in Revelation. Revelation describes a series of visions "revealed" to John of Patmos, presumably a respected Elder to the churches in Asia Minor, during a time of forced exile.

Probably the most misunderstood book in the Bible, Revelation has been so wildly misunderstood and used and abused by countless religious types that we often dismiss it as irrelevant or simply tune it out as incomprehensible or scary. But in so doing we run the risk of missing something extraordinarily wonderful.

Today we hear John's final vision, his vision of the City of God; and I agree with those who say this vision is his best and most glorious --and I will add that is not the least bit scary! In this vision we see the end of all things and John, through his poetic imagination, describes an image of heaven.

On my way to work every morning I pass by the Center for Spiritual Living and I notice that the Dr. who wrote the book *Proof of Heaven* is coming to speak. And the world has found his book very compelling. John offers us something possibly even more compelling and hopeful for people of faith.

Unlike the Doctor's account, what John tells us is not a documentary of someone who says he's been there. What we receive from John is a carefully crafted literary jewel written as a word of hope to give the faithful a new way to see things in a world that showed hostility or indifference to both them and to their God. Does that sound familiar?

And further--what is perhaps most important about John's vision is that both future and present collide. We see that heaven is not something God has in store for us simply after we die or at the end of all time; heaven is both here and now as well as thereafter.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian of the 19th century once wrote: "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be live forward." Kierkegaard was saying that one day life will be clear. One day we will say, "Oh I see!"

But we do live our lives forward so that means we must walk through this life with a certain amount of unknowing or as Paul puts it, we see through the glass darkly, but one day we will see God face to face.

Sometimes as we are living our life forward without the perspective of hindsight in can seem that the grace of God is something on which we have to wait. But In his vision, John invites us into the opportunity to understand life not by looking backward from our present, but backward through his vision of a new heaven and a new earth.¹

What he shows us is way more than a far off goal, more than a distant possibility, and more than a vision about the end of all things. His grammar moves ambiguously through the tenses. He leaves us wondering whether he is talking about something that has not yet happened or speaking about something that is happening now just beyond our perceptions, something that we simply haven't developed our senses to see, hear, taste, or touch.

John seems to be saying that perhaps the holy city of God is always in a state of descending, of touching and joining with the earth, even in the present time.

As one writer described it: "John seems to crack the window shades on this room we call reality, and we catch a glimpse of God's world surrounding us, just beyond the walls of reality---another writer Eugene Petersen, put's it like this:

¹ Eugene Boring

“Heaven is not remote, either in time or space, but immediate. Heaven is not what we wait for until the end of all things or we where we go when we die, but what is barely out of the range of our senses—John’s vision of heaven is an affirmation that that which we can begin to experience corresponds to what we will someday completely experience.”

That heaven is accessible to us now is not only good news it is also a call to open our eyes, our ears and our hearts and minds to glimpse its reality---to be a *part* of its reality.

Heaven begins on Earth. Heaven is the invisible to which we are drawn in the now as well as what will ultimately become fully visible. That may sound hard to follow so I will instead borrow more words, this time from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Alluding to Moses taking off his shoes before the burning bush she says:

*“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.²*

If we decide to accept this as truth then we see heaven not as something for which we must long, but something that is a deep affirmation of the good that already surrounds us; the good that we already experience, that we practice, the good for which we strive—we can choose to see that our lives are already immersed in a deeper, more holy reality.

This is surely easy to do on a day like the one we have been given in Seattle today---bursting with light and beauty, but this is especially important to hold and cherish on those days when the weather both outside our doors or raging in our hearts is grey, stormy, dark or threatening.

In the end we see that John’s final vision as told in Revelation is no horror story about destruction and punishment from a wrathful God; it is instead an image of a perfect city, of heaven coming to earth not just some far off day, but now and eternally.

So for those of us numbed by the ordinary, dazed by daily pressures, blinded by suffering, or simply longing for light after a long, grey winter, just remember this truth: All around us lies a gift too beautiful to believe, it is that for which our hearts long ---all around is God’s love and truth, God’s sparkling, tear repelling, pain-erasing, everlasting light and goodness.”³

All we have to do is take off our shoes and claim all of life as holy ground. When we ourselves can do this then we will help others see this truth and we can indeed create a heaven on Earth. Amen.

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org

² *Aurora Leigh*, VII, 821-24.

³ William Bender, *Revelation*, 96.