

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2018

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Revelation 21:1-6 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” 5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 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 without cost from the spring of the water of life.

“Heavenly-Focused for Earthly Good”

This Tuesday is May 1st. Just saying the month of May makes gives me a different way of thinking about today. I can’t help but start thinking about the end of the school year. That means summer. Summer vacation and summer plans. But for some of you, the end of the school year means the end of an era. The end of this school year means a new school or the next level of school. You can’t help but start thinking about your future farther out in the distance. Where you see yourself in five years. What you can envision your career looking like in ten years. How things will turn out way down the line.

Thinking about the future can be more productive than just daydreaming. It can help keep you focused. You set a goal. You keep it in mind. You concentrate on where you want to go. It can help keep you on track when distractions and obstacles pop up. When Jesus gives you this vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation chapter 21, he does it for your good. He wants you to maintain a heavenly focus throughout life. And with that heavenly focus, Jesus can do a lot of earthly good in your life.

Long term goals for work and career and family can help with the day to day routine of school. It can motivate you to push through the day to day grind of concentrating on classes and homework, teachers and classmates. And it’s not just students. Thinking about bring improved financial security helps with enduring a less-than-enjoyable job. A picture of the life you want to be able to provide for you children and grandchildren helps tolerate doing something every day that doesn’t live up to your dreams. Getting up in the middle of the night with a newborn, cleaning up messes during the difficult potty-training stages, quieting tears while helping with math homework and comforting middle schoolers getting bullied are all challenging. But you can persist when you think of how important that your little ones grow up to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. Plus, maybe they’ll take care of you some day.

But that doesn't mean any of us are keeping our focus on the even bigger picture. Revelation chapter 21 shows us our really long-term goal: **"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea."** (Revelation 21:1) The new thing God is promising us seems like something so far off that it would be foolish to let it occupy any of our attention. So we settle for the same old thing. And that's not all that shocking. It's just easier to focus on what's right in front of us. It is less uncomfortable, less emotionally draining if we can avoid thinking about the big picture to life.

We could take it up to the next level. Think of how much technology dominates developments in our world. Or how often our emotional energy is spent dwelling on political predicaments and events around the world. Even all our focus on advancements in science and medicine betray very earthbound hopes. Expectations we thrust onto other people and social agencies and the powerbrokers in our world to effect positive change, they all just show our focus is on the medium-term at best.

Now, it is important to point out none of these things are wrong or sinful in themselves. They just reveal our flawed focus in life.

Have you ever heard the accusation that Christians are too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good? In the way we act, the opposite is actually true. So much of our lives are consumed with things in our every day existence. We are focused on so many details about our earthly lives. Not that they are insignificant or unimportant. But we are losing our true focus as Christians. And the focus Jesus gives us in Revelation chapter 21 transforms our lives. We get this jolt in Revelation 21:5 **"He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"**

When we take a step back we realize so much of our efforts go into building a broken paradise. Any plans for a perfect society will come up short. Technology, politics, medicine - none of them can deliver.

Why does Jesus give us this glimpse of heaven in Revelation? It's not like hanging a picture of your dream home on the wall of your cubicle or a catalogue cut-out of a swimsuit taped to the outside of the refrigerator. It's not so we are only and always consumed completely by thought of future glory. It's because the gritty reality of daily life eventually takes its toll on us. We get so frustrated we decide we are just going to live life on our own terms. And if we don't see immediate results from our hard work and sacrifices, we start to wonder why we even put up a fight against temptation and sin. Maybe it's better just to give in to the dominant morality of our age since there's no use escaping this tired world no matter how hard we try. We get so discouraged by our failure to to improve relationships and effect positive changes and see results in the causes we care about. We get exhausted from demanding people and situations and organizations deliver what they are incapable of doing. Everything we do and everything we think is tainted by sin and its consequences.

The sobering reality God has in these verses from Revelation 21 is that the only possibility for perfection is when this present world is completely destroyed.

What we need is a new way of thinking. Revelation shows us a new heaven and a new earth so we can confront our old expectations and discard our old hopes. That's because God's new way introduces us to results way beyond our expectations. God is focused on giving us more than we could deliver with our best efforts and something better than what we can even imagine. He gives us this heavenly focus: **"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."** (Revelation 21:2-4)

If this is what eternity looks like, let it reshape your perspective on the present. Give up your false hopes for a perfect paradise here and now. Embrace the new way of viewing your daily life this side of heaven.

Recently I read an article where the author was advocating for lukewarm Christianity.¹ His basic point was that not seriously following the teachings of the Bible would be much better for a secular society. He brings up points like the Bible teaching that disciples are expected to hate their own family in comparison to how much they love Jesus. And they should avoid getting a law degree where they could fight to make the world a more just and ethical place in favor of attending seminary and becoming missionaries to Africa. He insists Christians are worthless fighting the real pressing issues facing our planet like overpopulation and climate change since we're so busy focusing on the gospel.

I would gladly accept his label as someone who is not a lukewarm Christian by those definitions. The biggest problem with the author's points, though, is that won't make real, lasting differences. However, a focus on heaven does make a dramatic difference in our world.

The new vision of Revelation 21 helps you see yourself with a new life and a new purpose in life. Jesus wants you to realize you are his bride. He takes you as his own, no matter how many of your goals you've achieved, no matter how much of a difference you've made in this world. You are prepared because you are robed in the righteousness of Christ and beautifully dressed because you are arrayed in the garments of the salvation he won. You have a new home. Your dwelling with God is only possible because of Christ's perfection earns you direct access to God. You are one of God's people because Jesus shed his blood for you. On the cross Jesus paid your debt of sin. Triumphant over sin means all the earthly consequences of sin are defeated. All sorrow and crying and pain are banished by Christ's triumph. Jesus rose victorious from the grave on Easter Sunday to conquer death. Death is defeated so you have a home where there will be no reason to weep.

¹ Ferencik, Jakub. "Why Lukewarm Christianity Is the Only Good Option for a Secular Society." Medium. Published 31 December 2017. Accessed <https://medium.com/the-humanists-of-our-generation/why-lukewarm-christianity-is-the-only-good-option-for-a-secular-society-8018a8e15f4e>

Now God gives you something that is dependable and will really work: **“He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”** (Revelation 21: 5) Gospel promises transform lives.

All our hope is based on the faithful and true words of our God who defines faithfulness and truth. God’s words are faithful and true. God’s words aren’t sketchy projections about the future or iffy forecasts about tomorrow or questionable predictions about what’s coming next. More powerful than trusting in science or government or social organizations.

In Acts chapter 16 we get to see such a transformation. When God miraculously burst open the doors of the jail where Paul and Silas were being kept, it led to a dramatic transformation. The jailer who was responsible for them was on the verge of suicide because of his professional failure. But after Paul and Silas spoke God’s gospel promises to him, he and his household were baptized and rejoiced in the reality of their new faith.

Christians call this the doctrine of vocation. We think of vocation as a job or occupation. But in the biblical sense, vocation is just living out your Christian identity in whatever situation you find yourself with any of the people God has put in your life.

Certain members of the Philadelphia Eagles have an understanding of vocation. Quarterbacks Carson Wentz, Nick Foles, and other players had more than Super Bowls on their minds.² They were thinking about how to share the gospel even through their professional football careers. Nick Foles enjoyed his Super Bowl performance, but is eager to attend seminary so he can be a pastor to teenagers. As much as fans in Philadelphia streamed into the streets to celebrate a Super Bowl victory, Christian football players know they can make a more lasting impact on lives by unleashing God’s gospel promises.

That allows any of us who aren’t professional athletes to live a Gospel-focused life. Do your best in school, remembering your ultimate future is secure. Sacrifice and save for your family, knowing God has a paradise in store for them. Enduring difficulty and push through tough circumstances with the guarantee God has an eternity of blessing in store. That heavenly focus gives a new perspective. Use technology and politics as gifts of God. But remember even those tools can be used to point people to the place where God will dwell and we will enjoy his presence. When current events and human suffering captivate your attention, pray for God to give you opportunities to lead those victims to a destination where there will be no more pain or suffering, tears or pain. Invest time and energy in people and agencies with the goal of sharing with them the words of God that are faithful and true.

² Smetana, Bob. “In a tough sports town, baptisms and Bible studies fuel many of the Eagles’ stars.” The Washington Post. Published 4 February 2018. Accessed https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/02/02/in-a-tough-sports-town-baptisms-and-bible-studies-fuel-many-of-the-eagles-stars/?utm_term=.ab73794af9f3

Whatever vision you have for your life, God's goal for you to live right now knowing your heavenly home is secure. And before you arrive there, God can use your life to impact others. With your heavenly focus, he can use your life to fill heaven. Amen.

Goal:

God transforms hearts through gospel promises fulfilled in the new heaven and new earth, promises that bring people into God's new order much better than any human efforts to transform lives and families and societies.