
THE FACE OF GOD
REVELATION 21:10, 22-22:5
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2022
BY THE REV. DR. CAROL GREGG

Prayer.

How do you describe the indescribable? How do you talk about the taste of your very favorite ice cream? What can you say about that spark of insight which impacts the course of your research? What was packed into the moment you opened the mail which contained your acceptance to graduate school? Can words express all that is communicated when you hold your partner's hand?

Despite the fact that there are over 171,000 words currently in use in the English language¹, sometimes it seems that is not enough to describe the indescribable. John, who wrote Revelation, the last book of the Bible, writes of his visions of the end times. The vision presented in our reading for today is of a new heaven and a new earth, complete with a new Jerusalem. How do you talk about that?!

John wrote of angels speaking to him and a spirit carrying him to a high mountain. From the mountain, John saw the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. If you close your eyes and try to imagine it, it is too mysterious to begin to picture. John speaks of the city as a bride, and as a radiant rare jewel. There are gates and foundations with the names of the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles. The city is pure gold, bejeweled with sapphires, emeralds, and pearls. The whole city is aglow with the glory of God, with no need for light from lamps or even the sun or the moon. Kings and peoples will be there, bringing glory, and nothing unclean will enter it.

The angel then showed John the river of the water of life and the tree of life, both producing an abundance of good. And there, in the midst of it all, is the throne of God and of the Lamb, surrounded by worshipers.

Does this description help you picture this vision? The light, the gold, the jewels, the worship, the throne of God? When I try to visualize it, it is hard for me to imagine so much splendor. So much glory. I think that is exactly the point. This is supposed to blow our minds.

John is not the first to speak of a new Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel, some 600 years earlier, wrote of his vision of restoration after the exile.² Ezekiel's vision also takes place from a high mountain, with an angelic figure as guide. God's glory would be marvelously abundant, radiating to all. John follows the pattern that Ezekiel set, with one key difference. Ezekiel focuses on the restoration of the temple, in all its beauty and grandeur. The temple helps to define what is sacred and profane, so Ezekiel's vision includes the walls to ensure that distinction remains.³ By contrast, John, in Revelation, claims that in the New Jerusalem, there will be no temple. He said, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." (Rev. 21:22) God is directly present to all throughout the city. The gates are open. Everyone has access to God and God is present to all. John then goes further in the vision. The worshipers around the throne of God "will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." (Rev. 22:4) The people will see the face of God. Indescribable!

Remember Moses? Moses talked to God on the mountain, then asked to see God's glory. While the Lord promised kindness and mercy, the Lord told Moses, "But you cannot see my face, because no one can see me and live." (Ex 33:20) Remember Paul? In speaking of what will pass away when completeness comes he wrote, "For

¹ [How many words do you need to speak a language?](#) By Beth Sagar-Fenton & Lizzy McNeill, BBC News, 24 June 2018

² Ezekiel 37-48

³ *Interpretation: Revelation*, by M. Eugene Boring, p. 218

now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (I Cor 13:12)

In the final vision of the final book of the Bible, here humanity sees God face to face. Finally, we stand in the presence of the Holy One, surrounded by God’s glory. Here John “anticipated the fulfillment of [our] deepest longing, the gift of seeing God’s face, living in God’s presence, and thriving on that presence.”⁴ Can you imagine that?

Well, here at Duke Chapel, we don’t have to image that; we can see it.. Not that we want to boast about it... too much. We see the face of God every Sunday in worship. You can see it right now. In the main stained-glass window behind me, there are 15 figures. Jesus is in red in the center of the top row. He is surrounded by the disciples and below them on the lowest row are prophets. You probably remember that there were 12 disciples, and with five prophets on the lowest row, that means there are only 9 disciples around Jesus. The artists who designed the stained glass knew there were 12 disciples, and the other three are pictured in the sanctuary, but I’m not going to tell you where. You will just have to stay after worship one Sunday to take the docent-led tour of the Chapel to find out. Now look directly above Jesus, to the top of the window, in the center, and there is the face of God! Well, at least that's how that particular piece of stained glass is named. Is it good that it is far enough away that we can’t really see all the details? You are welcome to bring binoculars to worship next week to check it out!

Even with the beauty of the stained glass, the woodwork, and the soaring arches of this chapel, which are designed to inspire and overwhelm us, we know these beauties pale in comparison to the vision that John describes. At the end, there is not some event or place, there is God. Fully, completely present to us as we are fully and completely present to God. What a promise! What a hope!

John also sees that God’s name will be on the foreheads of the worshipers. We will be claimed and marked as God’s own. No longer will the servants of God wonder if they are good enough, if their sins are forgiven enough, if their devotion is pure enough. God’s mark will be on us.

How we are marked does identify us. Father Greg Boyle directs Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, a major rehabilitation center for gang members. Fr. Boyle tells the story of one young man starting the long process of rebuilding his life. Boyle says, “Frank is two days out of prison and he wanders into my office and he’s sitting in front of me and tattooed on his forehead like a banner, like a billboard, is [an obscene phrase]. And [Frank] said, you know, I’m having a hard time finding a job. I said, well, Frank you know, maybe we could put our heads together about this.”⁵ Homeboy Industries now runs one of the largest tattoo removal programs in the country.

John’s vision in Revelation, assures us that we will be cleansed of past mistakes, but also that we will be marked as God’s own.

We need this vision that John records in Revelation. We are in Eastertide, the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost. This year, the lectionary gives us six passages from Revelation. This is the few times we encounter this final book in the three-year cycle of readings. Being in the Easter season, these are the hopeful passages, not the visions of battles and beasts. We need these visions of God’s glory and the Lordship of Christ. We need the promise that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” (Rev 21:4) At Easter, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus with glad and grateful hearts. Since then, we have heard news reports, we have seen injustice, and familiar pains have returned. For these 50 days, indeed every Sunday, again and again, we need to hear God's promises and be filled with hope. We need the truth that Jesus is Lord of all, now and forever. We need the promise that we will see God face to face.

⁴ *Texts for Preaching: A lectionary commentary, Year C*, Charles Cousar et al., p. 319

⁵ [Compassion and Kinship: Fr Gregory Boyle at TEDxConejo 2012](#)

One of the dangers, perhaps, of the glorious vision that John provides us is too much comfort. Does this vision of ultimate triumph, ultimate glory, mean that we can just wait for it?

Does this hope invite us to just sit down and wait? I imagine us sitting at a bus stop, waiting for our turn to get onto the bus headed for glory. As you do, when you are waiting for a bus, you look down the street, see what vehicles are coming, and read the signs on the bus. You might say to no one in particular “Oh, look, there’s a bus now. Ah – that one is for Esmerelda. There’s another behind it. That one says it is for Murgatroyd. Hey, that’s a really nice air-conditioned bus. How does he rate so well? Now there is one for George.” That is getting close for me. My father told me that if I had been a boy, he wanted to name me George. George Gregg. That’s a lot of g’s isn’t it? I never really knew if he was teasing or not.

Even if the bus stop was one of the nice ones, with a bench, a roof and three sides of glass, I think it would be impossible to ignore what was happening around us, while we waited. Wouldn’t we still hear the gunshots in Buffalo of an absolutely heinous, hate-filled crime? Wouldn’t we see the ambulances outside of a Taiwanese church in California? How could we miss the sounds of buildings crumbling on citizens in Ukraine? And if these did not get our attention, the Holy Spirit is likely to remind us of an ancient prayer in which we ask for God’s will be to be on earth as in heaven.

The vision of what God desires for us, what God will ultimately bring for us, makes the sounds and sights of our troubled world all the more obvious and all the more painful. War, violence, oppression and sin in all its forms is so far from what God wants for this world that we cannot ignore it. And some would claim that the greatest sin is to grow accustomed to it all. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “I have always thought that the worst sins of all are to get accustomed to injustice and misery.”⁶ He warns of being “paralysed by a chilly apathy.”⁷ Hope he asserts is the antidote to this apathy. Moltmann continues “Our true hope in life is awakened and sustained and finally fulfilled by the great divine mystery which is above us and in us and round about us, nearer to us than we can be to ourselves....We are called to this hope, and the call often sounds like a command – a command to resist death and the powers of death, and a command to love life and cherish it: every life, the life we share, the whole of life.”⁸

The hope and promise given by John’s vision is a gift. According to one commentator, “The gift becomes an assignment. If [this vision] is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God, is finally going, then every thought, move, deed in some other direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted. [Revelation] does not attempt to answer speculative questions about the future; it is offered as an orientation for life in the present.”⁹

May we hold on to the hope and promise of seeing God face to face, and may all our words and deeds point us in that direction.

Divine promises are sure. We will see God face to face.

Thanks to be God. Amen.

⁶ *The Source of Life*, Jürgen Moltmann, p. 7

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 21

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 39

⁹ Boring, p. 224