
Mortal God

Revelation 21:1-6a

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, November 4, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

“Later that night / I held an atlas in my lap / Ran my fingers across the whole world / And whispered / Where does it hurt? / It answered / everywhere / everywhere / everywhere.” These words of Somali-British poet Warsan Shire strikes a chord with our world and our lives. Where does it hurt? Everywhere! North, south, east, west. Rural, urban. All hues of blue. Everywhere. Everyone.

The world is hurting. Over the last few weeks, we’ve had several memorial services here at Duke, so death is in the air. You can smell it in the nation, too. The hate crimes. The political fights. The dehumanization of the other and of anything or anyone different. There is a stench of the mortality of our mortality. The reality of our mortal lives, the deadliness of it all. It hurts, everywhere.

Even on college campuses. Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental health problems among college students. 41.6% of students say that anxiety is their highest concern. 36.4% state that depression is an issue. 24.5% report that they are taking psychotropic medication. Then there’s the rise in sexual assault on campuses. 11.2% of all students experience rape or sexual assault. Among undergraduates, 23.1% of those victims are female students. Where does it hurt? Everywhere.

We have a crisis on our hands. Crises in our times. Crises in ancient times. The more things change, the more they stay the same. The saints knew this. That is the context of the revelation or ‘apocalypse’ to John. The saints of old knew from experience that it hurts everywhere. Despite a lack of consensus on the exact social situation of Revelation, it is still known as “crisis literature.” From the beginning, John speaks about his persecution and patient endurance (Rev 1:9), even enduring exile on Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:10; cf. Rev 6:9). Because of his Christian faith, he has a cross to bear along with the other followers of Jesus. Though they were a part of God’s heavenly kingdom, they lived in the earthly kingdom of the Roman Empire that competed with God for their allegiance. These ancient Christians, these saints, clashed with Greco-Roman culture and religion (Rev 9:20–21; Rev 13) because the Roman imperial cult was the most widespread popular religion of the day and the Caesars were worshipped as the embodiment of true divinity. Those who refused to participate in the emperor cult awaited death or economic privation. John’s revelation put him on a collision course with Roman imperialism. Like the image he paints of the sacrificial death of Christ, “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5), those who suffered under Roman oppression were the walking wounded. There was a crisis; there is a crisis—religious, political, social, psychological, economic. It was, it is, a matter of life and death for many, for the saints, for us. The mortality of our mortality.

We sing “O when the saints go marching in... O Lord I want to be in that number...” Do you really, for the saints of old endured a serious crisis? And we are in one. It may look or feel as if God has abandoned us, now and even forever, but John the revelator shows us otherwise.

The promise of God, as revealed by the seer John, is that there will come a new day, a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, “coming down out of heaven from God.” We may often assume we are going up to God in the future when we think of songs like “I’ll fly away, Oh glory.” We may think that we have to escape this earth, this

world, in order to be redeemed or saved. But notice that the numinous newness comes down from God. Notice how God is not a Neoplatonic earthly escapist from materiality; rather, God immerses Godself into our lives on the earth, even a new earth. God brings newness down, a new creation, new heaven and new earth. God has something new in store. There are things that will pass away; it will not be like this—the chaos, the crises—forever. But more importantly in my mind is that God doesn't only give birth to a new creation, God comes down to us as well. "Love came down at Christmas..."

God doesn't just give us something new; God gives himself to us! "See, the home [or the tabernacle] of God is among mortals. He will dwell [or tabernacle] with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." God wants to be with us at the end, but it's been this way from the very beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1). "...the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matt 1). God has always wanted to be with us because God is mortal, too. That's what the Incarnation tells us. God isn't just divine but human, even as we hear how Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. God shed human tears because the home of God is among mortals. "Love came down..." We know of the organization, "Habitat for Humanity" but remember that God's habitat is humanity. Among us and with us. With you.

I have a colleague who talks about "my people" or "my peeps." Well, we are God's peeps, God's people, for the home or tabernacle of God is among us, among mortals. God is not home until God is with us. John reveals the future present because God is not just among us then; God is even among us now. God is here preparing an eternal home for God because God is a mortal God.

God wants to be with you. God wants to be with us. With migrants, because in Christ he was one. With the prisoner, because in Christ he was one. With the homeless, because in Christ he was one. With the naked, because in Christ he was one. God's home is among mortals. God wants to be with us forever because in Christ, he took on human flesh and clothed himself in mortality for our eventual immortality. God will not leave us alone, even if you wanted God to leave you alone.

Earlier this year in February, there was a devastating car accident on 15-501. A pick-up truck crossed lanes and struck several vehicles. One senior citizen, a mother, was killed in the accident and her daughter-in-law who was in the same car, severed her arm and was bleeding profusely from it. A paramedic with Durham EMS, Corporal Christopher Langdon, was driving to work when he smelled burned rubber in the air. Instead of driving away to get to work, he drove toward the horrific scene. The SUV doors were jammed but once the firefighters pried the doors open, Langdon used an emergency tourniquet in his car to stop the woman's bleeding and saved her life. He would not leave the woman alone in her car; if he did, she would have died. When he was interviewed about his action, all he said was, "It's what I do. It's what I love."

God will not leave you alone to bleed to death because it's what God does and it's what God loves. God loves you and loves to be among us. The home of God is among mortals. God is with us. Christ is in our crises. Risking mortality, God accepts a mortal, deadly blow, eventually, through the cross. Like my 90-year-old grandmother who attempted to jump into the casket of my uncle, her youngest child, at his funeral, God wants to be with us, even if it kills him. A mortal God will smell burned rubber or death in the air and risk his life for us.

God can't be housed in this grand building; yet God's home is among the people. And God doesn't only desire to be among us or with us; God wants to be *in* us. This is what Communion says—God wants to be in mortals

through the eating of the bread and drinking of the cup. God's body and blood enter you through Communion, revealing that God wants to take up residence in your heart and life, in your bodies, literally. That's how close God wants to be—God wants to be in you, not just among you. “Do you not know that your bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit?”(1 Cor 6). God tabernacles in you.

The future present of God in Jesus Christ is among us. God's home is among us and in us. We may come hungry for God as we approach the table but know that God is hungry too. Hungry for you. Hungry to be with us, to dwell among us, to find a resting place among mortals. God wants to be home and his habitat is humanity. Will you welcome God home?

Our mortality doesn't scare him which is why God doesn't stay in the pulpit of heaven but comes down to us through a Word that became flesh and dwelled among us. The movement of God is a movement of intimacy from transcendence to immanence, even in this future vision. Jesus comes down despite our crises and chaos, despite our mental health struggles, despite hate crimes, despite suicides, because even in the valley of shadow of death, he is with us. And when God arrives home, and we are bleeding, he brings healing: death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Suicide will be no more. Sexual assault will be no more. Gun violence will be no more. And we will finally be at home with God because God's home is with us.

Indescribable, unfathomable, unimaginable in so many ways, yet God is reachable, touchable, and digestible. God is in you! God is with you! Wiping tears from every eye, touching you, making all things new. God will be at home and so will we. “Our God, our Help in ages past/our Hope for years to come/our Shelter from the stormy blast/ and our eternal Home.”