

**6 Easter C – May 26, 2019 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John’s Broad Creek
Acts 16.9-15 – Psalm 67 – Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5 – John 14.23-29**

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding:

One of those good things that surpass our understanding is The Revelation of John. This is some of what we do know. Most modern biblical scholars have abandoned the idea that Revelation was written by the same person who wrote The Gospel of John or the Letters of John. However, there is evidence to support the idea that all five of these biblical texts were produced by various members of the same primarily Jewish-Christian “Johannine community”. The author of Revelation may have been an itinerant teacher and prophet who went into hiding after the fall of Jerusalem.

The extravagant language and imagery of Revelation has given rise to much bad interpretation, with people scrambling to identify each item in the text with some concrete expectation about the future. Biblical scholars believe that Revelation is filled with coded language that has more to do with ancient Rome and the Roman persecution of Christians than it does with events that are yet to take place. For example, the code name for the beast in Revelation 13 is 666; this is widely thought to symbolize the name of Nero Caesar. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jews used the code word Babylon to speak of Rome. We see this not only in Revelation, but also in other surviving literature of the day.

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message Bible*, wrote a small book called *Reversed Thunder* about The Revelation of John. Revelation was one of Peterson’s favorite biblical texts; he wrote: “It is impossible to read the Revelation and not have my imagination aroused...the unfamiliar language of apocalyptic vision [calls] my imagination into vigorous play.”¹ He went on to say, “Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it.”²

A closer look at today’s lesson from Revelation reveals that the Revelation is ‘a collect’ in its own way. Revelation collects images from the Hebrew Scriptures and holds them into new light. Biblical texts interweave in the Revelation – pulling together the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Revelation’s river of the water of life rose from the earth in Genesis 2.6 and flowed out of the garden, through psalms and prophets and all the way into John’s vision. Revelation’s tree of life is the same tree planted by God in Genesis 2.9. In Genesis God separated the day from the night and in Revelation God’s presence brings day and night together again under the reign of God’s light.³

The portions of Revelation assigned for today are taken from the last of John’s visions recorded in Revelation – a vision of the great goodness that God is drawing

us toward. A place so beyond our imagining that even those most invested in autonomy and independence – nations and their rulers – will come and all that they fought wars to protect will be offered to God. The gates of God's holy city will never be shut by day – something one might expect in a place where all threats have been removed. The surprise for those who first listened to and read Revelation was that there would be no need to close the gates at night. There will be no night – no fear, no insecurity – since God's own light shines in the holy city.

A couple of year ago, I parked my car in a grocery store parking lot and when I returned to my car I found what looked like an invitation on my windshield. All the parked cars had the same envelope. Inside the envelope there was a fancy card that read – HEAVEN! Make sure you are invited. Come to our church and make sure you are on God's invitation list.

Indeed, there is language in Revelation that could lead you to believe that you do need to be God's special list – that heaven is by invitation only... *nothing unclean will enter the city, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's – Jesus' – book of life.* These words serve only as a reminder that entry into this city is by God's grace. We cannot earn this invitation – it is gift. Available to everyone, but still a gift...and by no means cheap. These words are also a reminder that those who live in God's holy city live lives appropriate for this city. The promise that nothing unclean will enter is, in the end, the promise that God will remove all that is unclean from all of us. God created each and every one of us worthy and in God we are restored to wholeness.

Nothing is more explicit in Revelation than that it is about God. Yet the apocalyptic language of the Revelation is so foreign and so different that it is an easy distraction. So people get interested in everything in Revelation except God, losing themselves in symbol hunting, intrigue with numbers, speculating with frenzied imaginations on times and seasons despite Jesus stern warnings against such activities (Acts 1.7). The Revelation is about God revealed in Jesus Christ. Revelation is not about the end of the world. Revelation is not about the identity of the antichrist and not about the timetable of history.⁴

Eugene Peterson gushes that the Revelation attempts to wrap language around thought that cannot be captured. God creates in ways past finding out, with energy and in beauty exceeding anything that we have eyes and ears for. Nothing that we encounter from birth to burial merely is. [Everything] is the marvelous result of God's making. God saves in ways that surpass our understanding, with persistence and wisdom exceeding anything we can will or comprehend.⁵ This is the message of Revelation.

Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. *x*.

² Peterson, *xi*.

³ “Katherine” *Prudent Graces: wondering through the Word* blog found at <https://prudentgraces.blog/>

⁴ Peterson, 187.

⁵ Peterson, 188.