

June 16, 2024
Rebecca Mattern
Revelation 21:1-6, 22-26
The Reflection

The first week of our Quest Sermon series, titled *Leaving Home*, we met the Israelites after they left Egypt and were led by God in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. We explored the importance of journeying to new places and people as a spiritual act that is woven into the fabric of the history of God's people.

Last week, our second week, titled *The Encounter*, we met Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, a story that reminds us that along our journeys we are to seek out and be open to new encounters with others and that curiosity is a tool faith that disrupts cycles of judgment and othering that expands our views of one another - and of God.

This week, we are exploring the importance of reflection.

I'm going to expand our New Testament Reading this morning, to include the first 6 verses of Revelation 21. Listen now to the word of God from Revelation 21: 1-6, and 22-26.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'
⁶Then 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

This is the world of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

A new heaven and a new earth . . . both of our passages this morning begin with this phrase. I wonder what surprised you or made you wonder as you heard the descriptions from each passage.

Will you wonder with me for a moment?

I wonder what comes to mind for you when you hear that phrase, a new heaven and a new earth, keeping in mind it is God's new heaven and new earth? What does it look like? What colors come to mind? What is there? Who is there? (20 seconds)

What about sounds? Are they Quiet? Loud? Calm? Excited? What about language? Sounds of nature? (20 seconds)

How does a new heaven taste and smell? (20 seconds)

What does it feel like? Check in with your body. What are you experiencing as you imagine God's new heaven and new earth? (20 seconds)

Now that you've had a chance to imagine what is in the new heaven and new earth, let's take a moment to look at the passages and see what is not present in these visions of a new heaven and new earth.

Isaiah says:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

And if we turn to Revelation we hear:

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

I wonder what these passages mean to you? After spending much of this week with the Intergenerational Mission Team and our mission partners, I envision a new heaven and a new earth that has no need for these agencies. I long for a world where there is no need to shelter people from violence or provide meals or safe housing, education, and advocacy. No need to observe Refugee Awareness Week or Juneteenth. No need to use time and energy to convince others that each person served is a human being, worthy of dignity, care, and love, not because they earn it or deserve it, but because they are. Just like you and me.

I wonder if the phrase Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven is more familiar to you - than new heaven and new earth. We often think of God’s Kingdom as a time in the future when everything is as God wants it to be because we are all fully living out the commands to love God and love neighbor.

I have a difficult time with the phrase Kingdom. Some of it has to do with the hierarchy and masculinity of king. You have likely heard me use the word Kin-dom instead - one that leaves room for leadership by all gender identities as well as flattens the hierarchy placing all people on a level plane. During my congregational field placement I worked with a pastor who used the term “God’s New Way of Being” and it struck a chord with me and I realized that my struggle with the terms kingdom and kin-dom is that they are bit too human centered and too narrow for my imagining of a new heaven and new earth. They leave me wondering if the new heaven and new earth would fall back into the old patterns. God’s New Way of Being is invitational and opens my sense of wonder, call, and longing to be a part of it now, rather than waiting for something in the future.

Let’s focus now on one verse: Revelation 21:3: “The home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s people and Godself will be with them.”

The home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them. How else can we encounter God in this new heaven and new earth but to be among mortals? And not just one or two - not just someone who looks like us or talks like us - for that would be to say that God only dwells among us and is limited to our descriptions and understanding.

As we have heard in the last two weeks of our sermon series, journeying out of ourselves, out our comfort, out of our particular location is a spiritual practice. Seeking out and being open to others with curiosity is a means of encountering God. And once we do so, we need to reflect on just where it was that we saw God dwelling among mortals? What new thing did I learn about myself in relation to God and with others? How is God creating a new heaven and a new earth through these encounters and what is God asking me to do with God's revelation so that I can partner with God to bring about God's New Way of Being?

I asked the mission team to reflect on their experience of their involvement last week and two of you made the connection to the Lord's prayer "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" Every week we repeat those words - how often do we really reflect on what they mean?

This past week we got a chance to be participants and witnesses to God's kingdom on earth and numerous ways - and I bet you are waiting for me to share some stories with you. Oh, how I want to do that - to tell you about God's Kingdom. Instead, I invite you into God's new way of being. In a few minutes the mission team will come forward. I invite you to journey to them in fellowship hall and encounter them and the stories of God they are characters in, and the hopes for God's new heaven and new earth that has been expanded for them. I invite you to ask them how you can be involved in expanding your own vision, and in so doing make God's kingdom known on earth even now. I invite you also to journey beyond these walls and out into the world to encounter God - in Juneteeth celebrations go and see what a vision of a new heaven and earth is for those who celebrate the end of slavery of their people. In Refugee awareness week - go and see what a vision of a new heaven and a new earth is for those who have had to flee home in search of safety. In Lansing's pride events - go and see what a vision of a new heaven and a new earth is for those who have been shamed for they way they are created.

Will you wonder with me again?

I wonder what comes to mind for you when you hear the phrase "God's New Way of Being". I wonder what invitation is there for you?

I wonder how God is inviting you to journey and encounter God who lives among mortals and to reflect on God's vision of a new Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven in ways you never even imagined.

Let us pray:

Sojourning God,

your Spirit exists everywhere, on every path, inviting us to move with curiosity and compassion toward each other.

Decenter us even if we become uncomfortable.

Show us how to be humble and willing to accept that all beings are sacred as created by you so that we will grow in peace, expand in love, and deepen in understanding.

Nudge and guide us, we pray.

Amen.