

Vision  
Revelation 21:1-6  
Craig Atwood, Home Church, May 18, 2025

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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God; 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."

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." Then 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.

## INTRODUCTION

If you have attended many Moravian funerals, you will probably recognize some of these verses from our liturgy for funerals. We are comforted by the promise that God will wipe every tear from our eyes and that death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. Moravians, in general, do not spend a lot of time speculating over what heaven will be like. All we need to know is that our Lord is also our Savior and when we are in the more immediate presence of the Lord, sorrow will become joy and mourning will become rejoicing. We place our trust in the one who is the beginning and the end, the Creator and the Redeemer, and that he will give the water of life to all who thirst.

But whenever one of our lectionary readings begins with a word like "then," you know that this is the conclusion of a much longer passage. The verses we have today come after a lengthy description of the end times and final judgment of the living and the dead. In context, this passage is not about our individual deaths, but about the old world passing away and a new world's emergence. For several chapters the Book of Revelation described the birth pangs of the new world, the times of trial and tribulation, the suffering of humanity and nature itself, before the New Jerusalem descends to earth and the people of God enter the city of eternal bliss. There is nothing wrong with using this vision at funerals to comfort and inspire, but this morning, let's look at this more broadly.

The technical term for discussing the End Times is eschatology, which is a great word that I don't get to use very often outside of seminary. I once wrote a paper on the eschatology of the Moravian Church and the professor only liked one footnote in the paper, which was about the God's Acre. So, the second draft of the paper was about how Moravians in the 1700s approached death and dying. That one won an award at a conference, so I guess Professor Morehead was right.

Moravians do not focus on the End Times as much as some denominations. The American Revolution was such an extraordinary event that many Protestants in America thought that it was the beginning of the end of history and Christ would return soon. Whole new denominations were started that made eschatology the center of their preaching and practice. Nearly forty years ago the academic dean of Moravian College, the Rev. Dr. Jim Heller, told me that he grew up in a congregation that believed that Revelation was the most important book of the Bible. He was so convinced that Jesus was coming soon when he was in high school that he didn't study for final exams. When Jesus didn't come, and he got rejected by several colleges, Jim realized that he should have worked harder instead of hoping Jesus would rescue him. Eventually he earned a PhD, and guess what he wrote his thesis on. The book of Revelation, of course.

## THE APOCALYPSE

Catholics and Protestants call the last book of the Bible by different names. English-speaking Protestants call it Revelation, but Catholics use the original Greek name, Apocalypse, which means Revelation or Revealing. There were several apocalypses written around the time of Jesus, but the only one to be included in the New Testament was the apocalypse written by a prophet named John who lived in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Most of the apocalypses, like our book of Revelation, describe the violent collapse of civilization at the end of history. This is why there is a genre of books, games, and movies that are called 'post-apocalyptic,' meaning that they set in a dangerous and grim future time after a nuclear war or plague. But that misses the point of an Apocalypse, which is that God is revealed as the savior of humankind when human society falls apart. The Apocalypse of John includes a lot of disturbing images about the end of time, but as we heard in our text for today, the true theme of the book is hope.

The Apocalypse of John has always been controversial. I've heard many people suggest that the island of Patmos had hallucinogenic mushrooms that gave John his visions. I don't think that was the case, but John's visions are certainly strange and confusing. There is a dragon and a seven-headed beast, a woman clothed in the sun, four horsemen, and so on. The book is kind of like a David Lynch movie or post-modern novel filled with dream sequences and a circuitous plot. Many people through

the centuries, including Isaac Newton, spent years trying to understand the visions without great success.

Some of the bishops in the early church did not include John's Apocalypse in the New Testament because it was so different from the gospels and letters of Paul. Even those who accepted Revelation as Holy Scripture disagreed over the meaning of the book. Was John was describing events that had already happened in the time of Emperor Nero or was he predicting events yet to come? There is a long history of people using the Book of Revelation to make sense of the world they lived in only to be disappointed when Christ did not return. It is easy to view the terrible things in Revelation as happening at any time in history. Many people who survived the Black Death or the Thirty Years War thought they were living in the End Times.

Way back in the last century, when I was in my teens, there was a book called The Late Great Planet Earth that sold over 28 million copies and was translated into over 50 languages. That's almost as many languages as our Moravian Daily texts. The author, Hal Lindsey, claimed that the book of Revelation revealed what would happen before the year 2000. There would be nuclear war between the USA and USSR, the antichrist would appear, the righteous would be rescued in a rapture, and Jesus would reign as king of the world after the decision battle of Armageddon. As you may have noticed, none of that happened. Lindsey died a wealthy man, which, if you think about it, is ironic in many ways. In the gospels, Jesus often warned his followers about false prophets who arise and try to deceive the righteous.

## LOVE

If the Apocalypse is so hard to interpret and potentially dangerous if people read it too literally, why is it in the Bible and read in worship? The simple answer is that the Apocalypse of John is ultimately a book that was written to give people hope, especially people who are politically oppressed and economically distressed. But we have to read the whole book instead of obsessing over its details. This is one of those times when you can miss the forest by focusing on the trees.

John begins his book with letters to seven churches, and the only church that was praised was the church of Philadelphia or the church of Brotherly love. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, that they love one another. By this sign, and only by this sign, people would know that they and we are Jesus' disciples. Despite all the violent imagery in John, the main point is that love endures.

What comes next in the Apocalypse is a detailed description of what the world is like when brotherly love is lost. The frightening visions of tribulations, war, pestilence, and famine in Revelation are dramatic warnings that if we lose our compassion and empathy, the forces of fear, domination, and violence will reign over us and make our

lives miserable. Except for the dragon, most of the terrible things in the Apocalypse are true to life. History is filled with societies that have collapsed into chaos and self-destruction because of greed, hatred, and arrogance. We are witnessing this right now in Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, Syria, and other places where hatred and oppression rule.

## BOOK OF HOPE

Too often, readers of the Apocalypse focus on the frightening images of war, famine, pestilence, and death. But there is more to the book than that. More than any other book of the Bible is necessary to read the entire book before interpreting it because the final chapters move from chaos to creation, from turmoil to a hopeful future for everyone who follows the path Philadelphia or Sibling Love. The Apocalypse of John has given hope to the victims of oppression because it ends with a beautiful image of divine justice on earth as it is in heaven.

This vision began with chapter 20 when John described the thousand-year reign of Christ, which we often call the Millennium or the Millennial Age when the Kingdom of God is established on earth. And then we get to our passage where John says: “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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

## JERUSALEM

We sing about the new Jerusalem in our lovefeast on Good Friday. Jerusalem the golden! The idea of the new Jerusalem has inspired reformers for centuries. Many utopian projects were inspired by this vision of the perfect, heavenly city being established on earth. The Moravian Church’s settlements, like Salem and Herrnhut, were modeled on the New Jerusalem. The original town design for Salem was a twelve-sided city, but that idea was rejected. The name for Salem probably comes from Jerusalem.

It is important that John saw a new Jerusalem. The old Jerusalem, as you know, is one of the oldest and most sacred cities in the world, but for over 1400 years Jews, Christians, and Muslims have fought over this Holy City. The old Jerusalem was the scene of many atrocities and crimes, and there were times when its streets ran with blood. But John received a vision of a New Jerusalem that would appear on earth. The old would pass away. The time of wars, famine, and injustice will end, and a new city would appear.

John says that the New Jerusalem will not have a temple because the Lamb of God will be there. There will be no need for priests and animal sacrifices because Christ himself will dwell there with his people. Imagine a city where there is no need of

police, courts of law, and prison. Imagine a world where there is no need of armies, navies, and missiles. Imagine a world where there are no longer “good neighborhoods” and “bad neighborhoods,” where no one needs to beg in the street or be ashamed of their poverty. Imagine a world where there is no need for temples and mosques and churches because the whole world is sacred. Imagine a city where no one suffers from hunger or disease or despair.

This may sound like I’m quoting John Lennon’s famous song Imagine, but the truth is that John Lennon was drawing on centuries of Christian hope inspired by the visions of John. The Christian hope that Christ’s kingdom will appear on earth and all things will be made new. It is a vision of a world to come, but it will only come if we remain faithful to the way of Christ. It will only come if love overcomes hate and compassion overcomes apathy. It will only come if we reject the proposition that there must be winners and losers in the game of life.

## CONCLUSION

Too many people through history have misread the Book of Revelation and believed that it is calling Christians to prepare for religious war. As Y2K approached, you may recall, there were congregations in this city that stockpiled food and weapons in anticipation of the apocalypse. Since so many people have used Revelation to frighten and abuse people, the Moravian Church today tends to ignore eschatology and the visions of John, but we lose something when we do that. John of Patmos calls us to imagine what the New Jerusalem will be like, a vision can inspire us to endure the sufferings of this age. Yes, there will be tears, but Christ will wipe them away. Yes, there will be mourning and pain along the way, but a better world is coming. Yes, we will drink from the water of life, but only after we are thirsty.

Revelation is a book of hope, hope for a better age. Tyrants, dictators, crime lords, and other oppressors fear many things, but what they fear most is hope. Because rebellions are built on hope.

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." May we all have the courage to follow Christ into a new world governed by the love of God. May we have the courage to hope.