

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Revelation 22

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Hope in the Face of Changing Realities

Revelation 22 Common English Bible (CEB)

22 Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb ²through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. ³There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

⁶Then he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.

⁷"Look! I'm coming soon. Favored is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy contained in this scroll."

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. When I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had shown them to me. ⁹But he said to me, "Don't do that! I'm a servant just like you and your brothers and sisters, the prophets, and those who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!" ¹⁰Then he said to me, "Don't seal up the words of the prophecy contained in this scroll, because the time is near. ¹¹Let those who do wrong keep doing what is wrong. Let the filthy still be filthy. Let those who are righteous keep doing what is right. Let those who are holy still be holy.

¹²"Look! I'm coming soon. My reward is with me, to repay all people as their actions deserve. ¹³I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. ¹⁴Favored are those who wash their

robes so that they may have the right of access to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, the drug users and spell-casters, those who commit sexual immorality, the murderers, the idolaters, and all who love and practice deception.

¹⁶“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to bear witness to all of you about these things for the churches. I’m the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star. ¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift.”

¹⁸Now I bear witness to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy contained in this scroll: If anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues that are written in this scroll. ¹⁹If anyone takes away from the words of this scroll of prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and the holy city, which are described in this scroll.

²⁰The one who bears witness to these things says, “Yes, I’m coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.

Hope is one of the central parts of our tradition. Hope is a word we hear in Christian language a lot. In fact the Good News of Christ is based in the hope of “God’s kingdom coming near,” the earliest and first phrase we hear from Jesus in the Gospels.

However, if you search the Gospels how many time do you think the word hope comes up in English translations? Go ahead at home say it to those you are with, or to yourself. One time in the King James, and about twice in translations like the Common English Bible.

That seems strange right? Our faith is based on hope...we are people of hope. Why then do the gospels seem to lack the use of a term like hope even in the Greek? I wonder if it is because Jesus embodies hope...if the very life we follow is filled with the way in which we hope to live, a life of hope.

How does that feel?

Earlier this month I shared with the congregation that I serve alongside of in Billings, Montana the image of hope being like the moment before you come up for air.

If you have ever been swimming, or placed your whole-self underwater you will know what I am about to talk about. Do you remember that moment just before you reach the surface? Your lungs are screaming out for air. Your heart is hopeful to be in a comfortable environment again. You can see the light glistening through the surface. Then you break the surface of the water and it is like connection, order, life has been restored to your whole-self. You breath in that air, your lungs fill up, your heart slows and a moment of peace endures for at least a second.

This month we have been studying hope as a people of God. We have examined hope as the foundation of faith. We have worked to understand how hope is not a method, but it is a foundation. We are have looked at how hope is living life with confident expectation: in God, in love, in Christ, in resurrection and in connection.

A retired Elder in our church, a pastor of many year's John Pugh sent me this about this hope:

Faith is the way we interpret the past.

Hope is the way we interpret the future.

Love is the magic ingredient that holds the two together

Amidst the backdrop of our world right now...we are going to both need to learn about hope and live as Christians. Hope lived out allows us to be brought low for our God, deep into our very God created being, so that we can go out and love others as God loves us and as we are to love ourselves. We, like Christ, will need to embody hope as we move ahead.

To talk about hope I first want to give us the opposite of hope, or as close as we can get to it. Just like hope has definitions that take some explaining, the opposite of hope needs some definition too. If hope is

the belief the deep breath will come, things will come to a place of rest, the dictionary definition of hope even involves a level of trust.

The word in English that may be the most opposite is despair. Despair being the act of choosing to believe that the future will be as bad as the current moment.

Let's not just leave despair at that, because I have seen people think they are despairing, or have thought myself despairing when in reality I think we need to understand what a lack of hope really looks like. Despair is really the place where we have to choose hope.

For most of us during the stay-at-home order this spring might have thought ourselves despairing. However, despair is not what happens when Amazon boxes take a little longer to get here or when toilet paper is no longer available at Costco.

However, in my experience despair better describes a loss bigger than this. It is when all has been lost, and a choice of hope must be made. That choice can be incredibly hard.

Take this line of people for example. These people have been near despair, and you can tell by their act of hope. They made a choice to stand in this line, miles long to wait for food. These are people in South Africa, many undocumented migrants outside Pretoria, who have one of hope for their family to eat. Standing in this line is a challenging choice in hope for them.¹ They were already living by spending any money they had on food before COVID-19 hit, and because of reduced jobs they now have to wait for relief food supplies. These people who were already living on a literal garbage pile, using it to build homes and

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-safrica/aerial-footage-shows-miles-long-queue-for-food-aid-in-south-africa-idUSKBN22C1TU>

recycling what they could find to make a living, have put their hope in standing in a line for the time being. On a side note some of the supplies being received are from UMC sources, so it is important to note how we indirectly become a part of some people's hope.

Or take for example this other picture I came across this week, that I believe is a picture of people choosing hope over despair.

My friend posted this picture this week of her father seeing his wife of 69 ½ years for the first time in 3 months. With health conditions and challenges this could have felt like stark separation, but both of them show us what the hope of seeing each other again looks like. Hope is them choosing to meet each other again.

A few different scholars throughout Christianity have come up with ways to describe the cycle of hope, and specifically how God works with us through hope. Paul Tillich had one version, and other have use some. However, the one that I want us to remember comes from Richard Rohr the Franciscan Friar. He describes the hope cycle found in the psalms, one of which I will read at the end of my message today as a prayer.

The cycle goes:

Order – Life is moving along and we don't know different, and it seems to be in right pattern.

Disorder – Something disrupts life. For Christians it can be personal sin something we do that changes things, community sin in that society or people turn us from God, or injustice in which there is something beyond our control that turns us off the path.

Re-Order – A time when we open ourselves to God's love and our connectedness and we realize the path with God is there in front of us.

Order is something we like it is that moment after God calms the waters like in Genesis. It feels like the world is in balance and we can focus on what matters.

Disorder is hard, it is in disorder that we feel displaced, like those South Africans in the picture before we feel like we are in a cue waiting for life to come back again. This is also the time in our lives when we wrestle with what really is hope, and love and God.

Re-Order is unpleasant at first...in fact at some level we wish we could turn to despair and many die right before re-order. Because as Jesus described new life is like birth again.

The scripture you heard from the Book of Revelation today is meant to be one of hope. More specifically it is the book that describes best the re-order phase of the cycle we just talked about.

There is a reason preachers avoid the Book of Revelation. It is full of meaning and re-ordering. You see in God's reordering no one will be comfortable and everyone will be safe. Let me say that again, "No one will be comfortable and everyone will be safe."

We, the everyday preachers, have sacrificed revelation to the people who preach the end times because we too are afraid it means that for God's order to happen we may have to go through challenging times, changing times. Perhaps we should all take note of this. For there to be God's reordering we will have to experience some discomfort.

When we hear people talk about the end times in the world they always focus on the lake of fire, and the dragon in revelation, quick to send people who don't think like them into those awful places. However, they miss the core message of Jesus' embodiment in this case. They miss the hope Jesus embodied.

When you focus on the lake of fire and the dragon, Revelation becomes the end of the book, the whole world thinks they know. It becomes this culmination, the last installment in the saga. However, we as good Christians need to put this book in its place. The book was written at the end of the 1st century. Meaning some of the gospels were actually

written down after this, doesn't really make Revelation the end of the story.

Next if we look at Revelation 22, our scripture for today we should pay attention to what happens at the end of the story. Most of us have been told that unless we accept Jesus then we will potentially go to hell. That is not what revelation says, instead it is a reminder of the cycle that we learn in scripture a cycle in which we live in God's time and if we hold on too tight to any part of that cycle then we risk being left behind.

More specifically if our tradition knows that challenges will befall us all as found in Matthew 5:45

“⁴⁵ so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. Then we all must let go of those things that make us feel like we are being individually punished.”

Revelation 22 has all the parts of the cycle of hope and life we spoke of earlier. It speaks of the order of the new world God wants. A place where people can live in a city with a stream flowing through it, and a tree growing to bridge the two sides offering fruit one kind for each month of the year. Everyone will have enough is what the image offers. Then the passage reminds us of the disorder in our world, be it a personal world or our collective world. It list out the authors understanding of things that can draw us away from listening to the word of God. Then the re-order is a reminder at the end not to change the scroll or face consequences, what sounds like the end of our Bible is not what it was written for. This warning was put at the end of ancient writings, not just in our Bible. This warning was the equivalent of ancient writings, “Sincerely” in common letters today. A reminder to please take the writing seriously, and not to change it for your own intentions.

It is almost as if the author of the text knew this would be placed at the end of the completed Bible in the 4th century, 300 years after it was

written. Because after the traditional sign off he adds the final re-order. The final re-order is the embodiment of hope. The write seem to know we would misunderstand his text. The last lines are a final reminder to us Christ is returning and grace is what he will embody. Grace being a hope that all will feel God's love, even those who do not feel worthy.

This book in our Bible that describes what some have called, "End times," is actually describing the cycle of re-occurring end times. And the possibility of God being let in to re-order with God's love. Just like he did with Jesus in a manger, and through resurrection. God will do it through his people now, if we can learn to let go and lean into hope.

Perhaps this story puts it best:

There was once a really old man, who had lived a long and very happy life on a beautiful island. He loved his homeland greatly. There on his island, all his family, through all the generations, had lived, made their homes and earned their daily bread. And so, when the old man realized that he was approaching the last days of his life, he asked his sons to take him outside one last time. There, he knelt and gathered a handful of his native soil, and clutched it tightly in his gnarled old fingers.

Soon afterwards, the old man died and came to the gates of heaven. The angels greeted him joyfully. 'You have lived a good life,' they exclaimed. 'Welcome to the kingdom of heaven. Please come in.' So the old man tried to cross the threshold of the heavenly kingdom, but as he did so, a kindly angel said, 'You must let go of the soil you are clutching.' 'Oh no, I could never do that,' he cried. 'This is my native soil, the earth of my beloved island home.'

The angels were sad as they went back to heaven, leaving the old man wandering, lonely, outside the gates.

Many years passed, and the angels came again. They brought the old man a taste of the heavenly banquet and feasted with him there, outside the gates, trying to persuade him to come into the fullness of the kingdom. He wanted so much to join them for all eternity, but again, when they asked him to let go of the soil he was clutching, he couldn't bring himself to do so. And again, they had to leave him standing there, alone.

Finally, after many more years had passed, the angels came again, and this time they brought with them the old man's granddaughter, who had grown old in the meantime and had died herself. She was delighted to see her beloved grandfather standing there. 'Oh Grandad,' she cried, 'I'm so happy you are here. Please come and join us in the heavenly kingdom. We love you so much, and we want you with us for all eternity.' The old man was overwhelmed to see his little granddaughter there, and in his joy he flung out his arms to embrace her. And as he did so, the soil slipped right through his fingers. With great joy, the angels now led him into his heavenly home, and the first thing he saw there was the whole of his beloved island, waiting there to greet him.

*Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (pp. 82-83).
Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.*

Here is the thing friends we have been deceived to believe God is about being the strongest, bravest and rightest person. We have been deceived that the cycle of heaven, the re-ordering of God does not happen in this life as well as the next. Anyone who holds up the Bible and claims strength, must not know that anyone who really lives in the story of God is brought low first and allows themselves to be drawn into God's cycle of life.w

Hope is a choice
Hope is hard
Hope comes from our wounds.
Hope comes from living through disorder.
Hope comes from God.

Please join me in a prayer from Psalm 40:1-3 Common English Bible (CEB)

For the music leader. Of David. A psalm.

40 I put all my hope in the Lord.

He leaned down to me;

he listened to my cry for help.

²He lifted me out of the pit of death,
out of the mud and filth,
and set my feet on solid rock.

He steadied my legs.

³He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise for our God.

Many people will learn of this and be amazed;
they will trust the Lord.