

The "Hope" Time
By Cherylann Richards
Revelation 21:1-6
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"I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. . . God will come and live with the people; God will wipe away 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." For most of us these words sound familiar, even if we don't go to church. They are often heard at funerals. And most of us like them, even love them. These words are comforting. They paint a vision of God living among humanity and reaching out to us to wipe the very tears from our eyes. What's not to love about that? Despite the fact that many of us recognize this passage and even love it, most have no idea what it refers to. Many of us don't like or may in fact dislike the Book that it comes from, the Book of Revelation.

During my very first semester of school in the fall of 2004 (yes I have been at this for awhile) I took the class New Testament Foundations with Professor Sze Kar Wan. We worked through the entire New Testament in 13 wild and wooly weeks. And by worked through, I mean we read every single word of every single book and each week huffed and puffed our way through 3 hour lectures with a professor that went at break neck speed. After that semester I invested in a lap top to save my hands. Needless to say by the time we got to Revelation, the last book, we students were exhausted.

But, not the professor, as it turned out, Sze Kar loved Revelation. We had finally gotten to the book that sparked his interest in the Bible. Oh God, we all sighed! He told us that back in China as a small child he was

bored with church. He was expected to sit in church quietly, but he was allowed to read anything he wanted. He always brought something to read because the Bible was, well, boring too. Until one day he forgot his reading material and was forced to pick up the Bible. Sze Kar ended up in the Book of Revelation. He was fascinated by what he found there: monsters and mighty angels, multi-colored horses with bows and swords, fire, storms, destruction, stars falling to earth, beasts coming from the sea, clouds of locusts wearing crowns of gold with women's hair and the teeth of lions, a new born child snatched from its mother to protect it from the dragon that was about to devour it and oh so much more! The bored little boy who would eventually become my professor was entranced. For weeks after he read Revelation during church.

So Sze Kar loved Revelation but I wasn't convinced. It seemed like a really crazy and perhaps even dangerous book. After all, Revelation is the book that is used by some Christians to condemn others. It's the book that the story of the rapture comes from. You know the story. If you're not "saved" than at some future point you'll be living through the tribulation, a pretty bad time, while those who are saved will instead be raptured. They'll be snatched away to live with Jesus while the rest of us suffer. Or for some, "*We'll* be snatched away to live with Jesus while the rest of *them* suffer." There are major arguments today among some Christians around who is saved and who is condemned.

But none of that makes any sense to me. It doesn't fit with the Jesus that I know from the gospels. The Jesus who welcomes everyone, forgives everyone, calls on us in the gospel of John to "love one another as I have loved you." The Jesus that said, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." Would that Jesus really separate people into those who are in and those who are condemned? I don't think so. Maybe we should just get

rid of the book of Revelation. That has been suggested and really, don't many of us simply ignore it?

And so, since I really didn't like Revelation, I chose, of my own free will, to immerse myself in the study of the book a few semesters later. I've discovered that sometimes when I learn about something I think I don't like I end up with a different opinion. And as it happened, I walked away from that class really committed to the message that God revealed to John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation.

Friends, the book of Revelation is not about destruction and condemnation. It is about hope. It is about daring to hope, daring to hope when it doesn't seem realistic, daring to stand up to empire and oppression with that mightiest of tools - hope. Revelation was written toward the end of the first century. At that time the little bands of Jesus followers had formed into small churches and were living under the rule of the Roman empire. At first they were ignored, but as they gained in number and influence the Romans decided these Christians, different as they were, were dangerous and an era of persecution was beginning. Christians were losing hope, they had believed that Jesus would return in their life times and all would be well. But a whole generation of the earliest Christians had died and still no Jesus, and now this current generation was starting to be martyred and still no Jesus. People were discouraged, even despondent. Some were beginning to stray and assimilate into the ways of the empire.

Revelation is a letter that was sent to seven churches to encourage them to hold on, to assure them that God would have God's way in the end, that evil would not succeed. And I'd like to suggest that this promise came to pass. The Roman empire did not succeed in wiping out this little group or the message of Jesus. The letter was meant to teach the new Christians how to live in that time after the alpha but before the omega, after the

beginning but before the end, that time in the middle, a time that required hope, the “hope” time.

The letter was also a warning, a warning that to forget to live as Jesus had taught, to forget that egalitarian community and caring for each other was the priority, to forget that they as Christians did not behave like Romans joining in in the oppression of others; to forget these things would lead to death. The threat of death was not made toward particular individuals, but toward the opportunity to take part in God’s plan for a new world. It was about the death of this new type of community that had formed, a community where the least was as important as the most powerful. The threat of death was about what would happen to those who lost hope.

Being called to live in the “hope” time has always been part of what has set apart the people of God. Listen to these words from Isaiah written at least 300 years earlier. “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind . . . I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it . . . no more shall a child live but a few days.” Do these words sound familiar? The writer of Revelation was most likely familiar with these words from Isaiah. The writer of Revelation recognized the hope of the past and was reminding those in the present of its powerful effect. Every human soul that has ever lived has pined at some point for a radically new world. A world where there is enough to eat, where elders don’t see the fruit of their labors lost to war, where chaplains are not needed in the emergency department to pray with the family of a young man just killed in street violence. A world where there is love, peace, and justice. Hope is what calls us to get up and keep working with God towards this vision. Are you willing to answer the call and live in the “hope” time.

Let's fast forward to this past week. On April 23, Arizona governor Janice Brewer signed legislation that requires law enforcement personnel to demand to see immigration papers from anyone who they have a "reasonable suspicion" is in the country illegally. Friends this means people in Arizona with dark skin and Mexican accents are going to be detained by the police for no other reason than their dark skin and Mexican accents and perhaps an appearance of poverty. And if Mexican people are in this country legally but don't have their immigration papers with them when they are pulled over they will be subject to 6 months in jail. Have you ever left the house without your wallet? Does anyone deserve to go to jail for such an offense?

"See, the home of God is among mortals." Friends is this type of city a place where God would want to dwell? Which mortals is God choosing to live with? Aren't we all the people among whom God will choose to dwell? I understand that we as a country must be good stewards of our resources, but we also must be good neighbors and we must treat all mortals within our borders with the dignity and respect due them as sacred human beings, as children of God. With God there is no illegal person. We need a comprehensive reform of immigration policy but in the meantime we cannot simply single out brown skinned brothers and sisters for harassment.

The UCC understands this. Last year the UCC designated the first Sunday in May as Immigrant Rights Sunday. On this Sunday we are encouraged to learn about immigrant concerns, honor their contributions to our country and communities, and listen to hear where God is leading us regarding issues of immigration. The UCC has been a long-time advocate for just immigration policies that guarantee legal rights to every person living in the United States. We can be very proud of our church and we are called to prayerfully consider stepping up and adding our voices. As disciples of Jesus, we commit to loving one another, we are called to care

for the least of these and we are called to proclaim the Good News to all, including the stranger and the immigrant. Learn about the Arizona law. Ask yourself if it characterizes the way that God asks us to live with each other. If you think it does not consider adding your voice to the growing dissent.

What sorts of things will pass away with the first heaven and the first earth? Many things will pass away, but this Sunday let us focus on racism and the fear that causes us to hoard our stuff for ourselves. There is enough to go around. God's gifts are abundant. It is fear and greed that causes the illusion of scarcity and the resulting ways that we sin against each other. According to Brian Peterson, when the first things pass away *the chain reaction of human sin will end*, it will end, we'll stop hurting each other. We'll finally learn to *love one another* and care for *the least of these*. When the first things pass away racism will no longer make any sense. And God will wipe away ALL the tears, the tears we shed AND the tears we cause.

Friends, we can be witnesses to the hope of that new city to come, the place where God will dwell among mortals. We are witnesses when we do dare to live in the "hope" time, that time between the alpha and the omega. We already glimpse this new city when we see the relief on the face of a stranger when she or he finally finds welcome for *all of who they are* here in this sanctuary. We glimpse this new city when we reach out to care for one in our midst who needs our love and our help. Many will glimpse this new city when they witness this church and marching and singing with other churches in Saturday's Pride Parade. We choose to live in this middle time, the "hope" time, knowing that God is with us, and with the stranger, and with the immigrant. God joins all of us in this gospel, God joins all of us at that table, God joins all of us in this church, and in other

places and traditions of worship. God joins all of us in the “hope” time.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

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