

Where God Is (Revelation 21:1-6a)

I remember sitting in church as a 9 year-old kid. Bored—as 9 year-olds in church often are. I'd done the word search in the kids' bulletin, filled up an offering envelope playing Tic Tac Toe with my brother. Not a whole lot else to do.

"You could listen," my mother would say. But that seemed like an impossibility to me at the time ... and even sometimes still.

So, I took out a pew Bible and started rooting around in it. I'm not quite sure how I got onto Revelation, but I did. And in fairly short order I was reading about beasts and dragons and the end of the world.

At first, I thought, "Wow! This beats the heck out of listening to some guy drone on from the pulpit." (It was always a guy.) It was like sci-fi/fantasy stuff. Tongues made out of swords, cataclysms, a rider on a white horse. Right in my wheelhouse. It was the stuff

of comic books and video games. (Of course, there weren't video games at that point in history, kids. Back in the Middle Ages all we had to play with were rocks, pointy sticks, and Pong.)

But pretty soon that which had at first intrigued me started scaring me when I realized that somehow I might be caught up in all of these crazy end of the world shenanigans.

And I thought, "How do they let kids read this stuff? What are my parents thinking? They won't even let me watch *Three's Company*, but they'll turn me loose to roam around in the book of Revelation completely unsupervised?"

Then, of course, I remembered a Larry Norman song that was popular in the church circles I ran around in as a kid. Brutal, this thing was. Scared the bejeebers out of me:

*life was filled with guns and war
and everyone got trampled on the floor*

i wish we'd all been ready

children died the days grew cold

a piece of bread could buy a bag of gold

i wish we'd all been ready

there's no time to change your mind

the son has come and you've been left behind

a man and wife asleep in bed

she hears a noise and turns her head he's gone

i wish we'd all been ready

two men walking up a hill

one disappears and one's left standing still

i wish we'd all been ready

there's no time to change your mind

the son has come and you've been left behind

I Wish We'd All Been Ready. What kind of title is that? It wouldn't surprise me if that song is where Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins got the title for their own schlocky *Left Behind* series about people being magically caught up in the clouds to be with God, leaving unpiloted passenger planes to crash into the ground.

It gave me nightmares. Jesus coming back to steal people away from their families in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep for thinking about the rapture.

You know about the rapture, right? It's that belief among certain sects in popular Christianity that Jesus is going to come back in a flash, and all the Christians are going to magically take hold of a celestial port key or disapparate, taking their rightful place in heaven—while leaving the rest of the world to figure out how to scrape by in some post-apocalyptic ecclesiastical version of Thunderdome.

They used to have bumper stickers when I was a kid that said: “In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.” Remember those? My old seminary professor, Newton Fowler, with a decided antipathy to rapture theology, used to say he wanted to produce his own bumper sticker that said: “In case of rapture, this seminary will be fully staffed.”

But the rapture’s not a thing—at least, in the Bible it’s not a thing—not the popular pre-tribulation rapture, anyway. Yanking everybody out of their Birkenstocks and depositing them in front God’s heavenly throne.

That’s the picture the rapture inspires, though, isn’t it? God is somehow “out there,” and the point of the rapture is to get all the faithful out of **here** and “out there” where God is.

Which is why this passage from Revelation seems so weird, so incongruous. Instead of a rapture in which select human beings vacate the planet to go to where **God** is, the author of Revelation

has the movement going in the opposite direction. According to this passage, the new Jerusalem comes “down out of heaven” to where **we** are.

Instead of God plucking up mortals and transporting them to where God is, Revelation shows God coming down to live among mortals. That is to say, when Jesus redeems time and creation, the rapture goes in reverse, and God makes a home among **us**.

If this passage in Revelation is anything like right, that changes the fundamental assumptions about just how important “**here**” is, doesn’t it?

What I mean to say is that if the new heaven and the new earth are located where **we** are, then where **we** are is not just a stop along the way to someplace better. Our job as followers of Jesus isn’t to live in such a way that we’ll be miraculously raptured out of **here**, but to live in anticipation of God’s intention to make a home right here in our midst.

Revelation shows us that rather than destroy the home of mortals in some apocalyptic fireball or in some divinely manipulated Hunger Games, God intends to set up shop among ***mortals*** “making all things new.”

So, let me ask you a question: If God loves this place where ***we*** are ... enough to come live among us, what are the implications for how we treat this place and those who live in it?

You see where I’m going with this? I mean, we’re getting ready to talk about stewardship, right?

If God is stoked enough about this place where we are, then the “old heaven” and the “old earth” aren’t disposable vessels to be abused as we see fit because they’re only going to be blown up in favor of more celestial accommodations anyway. If we’re already living on the site of the new heaven and the new earth, shouldn’t we be treating this place with some respect?

I mean, God cares enough about the earth to set up shop here, which means we have a responsibility to treat it with care. The environment, the atmosphere, the water, the air, the earth itself—these aren't just resources to be used or places to dump our unwanted styrofoam cups; this is the nest we ought to be very circumspect about fouling.

Wendell Berry reminds us that creation "is not a place into which we reach from some safe standpoint outside it. We are in it and are a part of it while we use it. If it does not thrive, we cannot thrive."

But more than just its usefulness to us while we're here, creation is the product and object of God's creative desire. Consequently, we ought to be especially reflective before we abuse the site of the new heaven and the new earth, which, if our passage this morning is to be believed, is God's ultimate home address.

But perhaps even more importantly than the location of God's home address is who already lives there. That is to say, not only is it important to be mindful of the fact that God intends to pitch a tent in this place because God loves ... this place, it's important to remember that God wants to live in this place because that's where **we** are.

The home of God isn't in some otherworldly alternate universe; the author of Revelation tells us that "the home of God is among mortals." That's us! God doesn't have a second vacation home in La Jolla. God's primary residence is right here, in the middle of all the folks we love, as well as the folks with whom we wouldn't be caught dead on a Saturday night. Right here. With us.

And if we should treat the world we inhabit with respect and care because God is here busy carving out space for the new heaven and the new earth, what does that say about how we should treat the people who **also** happen to reside at this address?

If God loves all these folks enough to want to make a home among them, how can we say we love God if we can't love them too? And not just the lovable ones either—friends and family, Mr. Rogers, and Andy Griffith. What about the folks who live here, who aren't easy to be in the same room with, let alone occupy the same heaven with?

See what I mean? C.S. Lewis said there are folks who'd rather live in hell all by themselves than live in heaven with people they're pretty sure don't deserve to be there.

But there's the catch, isn't it? Our passage this morning about the new Jerusalem doesn't say that God's home is among mortals ... except for, you know, the Muslims, or the atheists, or the Republicans (or Democrats, depending on your politics). God doesn't say, "This place would be just perfect if we could get rid of the people who live on the other side of town, if we could just check papers for the undocumented, or the hoodlums, or St. Louis Cardinals fans." God says, "Ok, so it's a fixer-upper. I'll take

it. I'm going to do a little renovation anyway, but the neighborhood is just exactly my kind of people."

Now, some of you might be saying, "We're a pretty good ways into this whole thing, and it's still not clear to us what this has to do with All Saints day. Are you getting close to anything like a point?"

Ah, I'm glad you asked. When we talk about saints, we usually have the varsity Christians in mind, don't we? The folks who've been so virtuous that the church has put them in the Christian Hall of Fame. The big names like the apostles, or St. Francis, or St. Hildegard, or St. Ignatius, or St. Julian of Norwich. You know, the bigwigs.

Or if they're not official yet, people like Mother Theresa or Billy Graham, or Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Harvey Milk.

And if we're being practical about it, we mean the saints who've been in our lives. Uncle Earl or Grandma or Mom or Dad or that eleventh grade chemistry teacher who never gave up on us or the woman who usually sits behind us in church.

Whoever we think of, they tend to be folks who've gone on before, and who are now in the presence of God. In the funerals I do, the final prayer ends by saying, "Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen."

In other words, it's common to assume that the saints are those who already live in the presence of God—those who have endured, who've remained faithful, and who sit at the foot of the throne of God singing praises and (according to Revelation) offering up prayers like incense on our behalf. The saints in light, in some far off heavenly abode, where the streets are made of

gold, a city of crystal with 12 gates made from 12 pearls; which is to say, some place way out there, and way different from here—where we still try to make sense of the episodes that prompt movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, or #ICantBreathe, where we still struggle to endure global climate change and housing shortages and terrorism and hunger and disease and *The Real Wives of Des Moines*.

But if the saints are those who live in the presence of God, and if Revelation tells us that the home of God is among mortals—right here where we are—then the saints are here among us now ... all those who've gone on before, to be sure, but also (and this is crucial) all those who **continue** to endure, who **continue** to struggle to remain faithful, who **continue** to sing praises and offer up prayers like incense on our behalf. We're not the only saints, of course, but we stand in a long and unbroken line of saints who continue to try to live lives meant to welcome God home.

Because home is not only where God is; home for God is where **we** are.

We're part of "the glorious company of the saints in light" right now—not just in some future otherworldly place. God lives among mortals, among those who spend their days in the factories or on the farms, among those who struggle to make it till payday and those who stand in line forever at the DMV, among those who fear everyday for the safety and well-being of their children and those who, every so often, manage to do something heroic and brave.

Where God is is **here**, which means that we probably ought to do our best to be **here** too, loving the people with whom we happen to occupy this dusty patch of ground—**all** the people.

There's plenty enough rapture in that.

—Amen.