

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, pastor
“A Tale of Two Cities, Part 2”
Revelation 21: 1-11, 22-26
14th Sunday After Pentecost
August 21, 2016

Today is Part 2 of “A Tale of Two Cities,” and the next to last sermon in our summer series on the book of Revelation.

In “A Tale of Two Cities, Part 1,” we read of the city of Babylon. Babylon was the author Pastor John of Patmos’ shorthand for the Roman Empire. Babylon/Rome was a place of great wealth and a place of great poverty, a place of struggle and division, a place where some had too much and a great many had too little, a place where people were choking on their anxiety, fear, and anger. (1)

As today’s reading opens, that city has met its doom.

Listen now to Pastor John’s breathtaking description of another city, the city called “the new Jerusalem.”

There is a drawer in the church office which bears the label, if you can believe it, “Funeral Files.”

I know that this may sound a bit morbid to some of you, but those files are your pastors’ treasures.

You see, the greatest privilege that we pastors have is that at tender times in your lives, when you marry the love of your life, when your baby is baptized, when you receive the scary news that your baby who is now a teenager has been in a wreck and everything is okay, but you are just scared and you need someone to talk to, you invite us into your lives. We know that we haven’t done a single thing to deserve being with you in these “thin places,” as the Celts call them, those moments, both joyful and sorrowful, that are luminous with meaning, except that our job title is “pastor.”

It is a great privilege to be invited into your lives at any time, but I haven’t met a pastor yet who would not attest that the greatest privilege that anyone, anywhere, anytime bestows upon us is when the family of someone who has died entrusts us with the responsibility of leading the funeral or memorial service of his or her loved one.

And that is where the Funeral Files come in.

In the files are contained the Scriptures that you wish to be read, the hymns that you wish to be sung, perhaps even the obituary that you have written. (Sometimes the files haven’t been put in a drawer in the church office. Sometimes, you even specify the hymns that should definitely NOT be sung because the theology or the melody strikes your ear like fingernails dragged across a chalkboard.

(Writing down the songs that you don't wish sung at your funeral is not bad thing to do because you never know, those same songs might be the very ones that your children just love!)

We pastors treasure these files not only because they make planning your funeral a lot easier on everybody, including us, but because in reading through them, we experience how you are continuing to say yes to the question that Revelation has posed over and over again, "Can I get a witness?" The answer comes: Yes, I will be a witness, even beyond my earthly life on this planet.

Maybe it is because over the course of the past few weeks my pastor job has involved more than the usual number of funerals—although I'm not really sure what "usual" is, but I have come to regard our reading from Revelation 21 as Pastor John's own funeral file. Chapters 21 and 22 are his final answer to the question that is the overarching question of the entire book of Revelation, "Can I get a witness?"

And that to which Pastor John ultimately witnesses is not about living a good life on earth so that one can be rewarded in the afterlife in heaven.

The vision that is Pastor John's final witness is that the heavenly city does not stay up in heaven. It comes down out of heaven to earth. Contrary to ideas about the "Rapture" of God's people from earth, there is no "Rapture" in Revelation. Instead, what we find is a picture of our loving God "raptured" to earth to live with us. God comes to us and with great tenderness takes a snowy white, billowy handkerchief and wipes away every tear from every eye so that there is no more crying, no more pain, no more grief and sorrow. (2)

Pastor John's witness to the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God and pitching a tent right in the midst of us mortals invites us to live into the hope where there is no more mourning or crying or pain even when the everyday reality looks a whole lot different.

I have had a good number of conversations with you this summer in which where you have expressed appreciation for our summer-long journey through Revelation. Often the person will say that with all the events of summer – violence, terrorism, extreme political rhetoric—the sharp distinction between good and evil which is present in Revelation has been a timely and prophetic reminder of how Christ followers like you and me are called not to accommodate to such values, but to confront them courageously.

But it has occurred to me recently that in my life, the daily battle is not often between good and evil. The choices in my life are rarely so epic. I don't know how it is with you, but for me, on most days my real battle is between doing good and doing nothing.

Dierdre Sullivan helped me to identify my own battle when she described her own in an NPR "I Believe" segment. Her radio essay is entitled, "I believe in always going to the funeral."

"I believe in always going to the funeral. My father taught me that.

The first time he said it directly to me, I was 16 and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. "Dee," he said, "you're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family."

So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, "Sorry about all this," and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes...

Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that. "Always go to the funeral" means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to. I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy...You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour...

On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral. (3)

We are the beginning of the school year. Life is hectic. We greet each other: How are you? And we answer each other: I'm busy. I'm busy. I'm busy.

In the midst of it all, let us remember John of Patmos' funeral file and the vision that he holds out of a world where there is no more weeping, no more pain, where everything has been made new, and all of God's children are breathing in and breathing out the light and air and freedom that is life itself.

And let us be willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of that heavenly vision.

...To stop and write a note to the CEO of the grocery chain to compliment the way that person at the customer service desk calmly and professionally helped you sort out your problem with your order;

...To break away from your upper class group of friends to notice the freshman sitting all alone in the school cafeteria or Vail Commons and to go over and introduce yourself and ask his or her name and inquire about how things are going and offer a word of encouragement;

...To get out construction paper and markers and glue and make a card for no particular reason for your coach or your piano teacher except to say that I appreciate you;

...To make a pot of soup to take to your neighbor whose spouse has just come home from the hospital;

...To go to a funeral, even if you don't know the person or the family all that well.

People who make a witness to God through their willingness to be inconvenienced. This is often what it looks like—the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God.

1. From today's Call to Worship adapted from a prayer by Rosie Venner.

2. Barbara R. Rossing, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today* (Louisville: Horizons Presbyterian Women, 2010), 73.

3. Dierdre Sullivan, "This I Believe: Always Go to the Funeral," NPR, All Things Considered, August 8, 2005.