

Week of All Saints' – Year B – November 4, 2009 - Homily
Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44
Susan E. Wilmot

There's a delightful quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* that I see quite often included as the signature message in personal emails. It goes like this, "Earth's crammed with heaven, /And every common bush afire with God; /And only he who sees takes off his shoes; /The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries." Based on our experience, and after reading tonight's revelation from John, we might disagree with Browning about heaven on earth. It often doesn't seem that way at all. In his vision of the future, John is seeing a new heaven and a new earth. Doesn't it sound as if the earth we currently inhabit is going to be wiped out in the completion of God's plan, and all the faithful saints in heaven and on earth will be relocated to some parallel and perfect universe?

In Genesis, we read about God creating the earth and pronouncing each aspect of creation as "good". This is a glimpse of our origins, and the answer to the question, "Where are we from?" In the Revelation to John, we are given the incredible vision of our ultimate end: the goal and purpose towards which all of history is moving. It was a vision of hope and comfort to God's people caught up in one of the many capsules of violence and persecution that have infiltrated God's creation. It remains so today. The Revelation to John is also a foretaste of the everlasting reign of God, which is the consummation of God's plan of redemption for all creation, and all God's creatures. It is the answer to the question, "Where are we going?" What might be surprising to us is the strong physicality of John's description of the new heaven and the new earth, the New Jerusalem, and all the people who live there. There is no escaping the importance of our material nature in our earthly lives or in the life to come. And this is not to be confused with materialism, which has sadly become a way of life for many.

As we heard on Sunday, our resurrection life is not delayed. It is present in the here and now. The inbreaking of God's kingdom has already begun, and it is our mission to live into the kingdom through our daily practice of Christian disciplines and virtues. Eugene Peterson describes it like this, "[The kingdom of] heaven is a... confirmation that the beauties and sanctities of the visible creation – tree and rock, Jesus and Eucharist – are not illusions that trick us into ... the ... practices of love, hope and faith, but are realities ... in strict correspondence with what has begun in us and will be complete in us." In other words, there is no distance between the realities of heaven and earth. What we are called to participate in is God's remaking of the new heaven and the new earth, which is our eternal home. The more we participate with God in Christ Jesus, the more apparent God's reality becomes to us. We are standing on holy ground, and that should make a big difference in how we fulfill our role as stewards of God's creation.

Let's look at some of the details. Throughout history, the Book of Revelation has been horribly misused and misunderstood. Imagine how you might feel if you read this description of the new earth literally: "and the sea was no more." Does that really mean no fish, no dolphins or whales, no turtles or any of the incredible beauty and bounty of the oceans? Revelation is full of rich symbolism and the reference to the sea being "no more" is also symbolic. In Jewish apocalyptic literature, the sea represents chaos and the evil power of the underworld. In John's vision of God's new creation, there is no space for such chaos. Sin, death and evil have all been conquered once, for all, through Christ's life, death and

resurrection. The community of the faithful will live without sickness and pain. We will know what it means to be fully healed and reconciled to God. In a world without sin, there is no death and mourning, and no tears, only love, peace and joy.

We will live together in peace in the holy city, the New Jerusalem. The city is described in the next section of Revelation as a physical place in which the redeemed will dwell with God forever. This is a very different place to the mad rushing, money-obsessed centers of greed, corruption, and the pursuit of power that at least I tend to associate with big cities. Wherever we find ourselves, we may sometimes wonder why we are in a certain place at a certain time. Experience tells me that we are usually not far from the path that God intends for us to follow. If we are uncertain about what we are supposed to be doing, the best advice we can follow is to grow where we are planted. Entering the kingdom of heaven is no less a part of that process. As Peterson reminds us, "We enter [the kingdom of] heaven not by escaping what we don't like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us."

The language used in John's Revelation, provides an alternative reality to the propaganda of Rome, which promoted itself as an ideal city. While Rome was a thriving center of injustice, exploitation and idolatry, the New Jerusalem describes the continuous presence of God among God's people in an intimate relationship. As God's plan unfolds in history, the past, present and future are intermingled. Jesus, God incarnate, has already lived amongst us and even now, we are eagerly anticipating His return in glory. What's more, as the Body of Christ in the world, God the Holy Spirit dwells with us. The hope of the resurrection not only proves the point of our own physical transformation, but assures all the faithful that we will dwell with Christ again. Just as the Body of Christ unites all the faithful across earthly boundaries, in the New Jerusalem we will be united in perfect love and peace. There will be no discrimination or prejudice between God's children. Community is a gift of God, and community is where God dwells with God's people.

"It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." As God's creatures, our origin, purpose and goal in life belong in God, and are under God's direction and providential care. Eternal communion with God is the proper destiny of the church, the nations, and the entire created order. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are comforted by the knowledge of our own salvation and everlasting life with Christ. It is no frail and feeble hope relying on human imagination or belief in temporal consolations. "It is finished," says Jesus before His death on the cross. "It is done!" says God from His heavenly throne. God is our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer. God is the creative power behind all life, and God is sovereign over all creation, and so we pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." Earth really is crammed with heaven. The question is, "How does that reality change how we live?"

Amen.