

**God's People**  
**A Homily for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**All Saints Sunday, November 4, 2018**  
**Revelation 21:1-6**

Genesis tells us that many, many years ago, the earth was a formless void. My Old Testament professor called that void a sea monster or a chaos monster, this kind of cloak of boggy nothingness. And then, the author tells us, the Ruach, that is the spirit, or the wind of God, blew across this sea of chaos, and shaped, and created, and formed a world, a good world, a very good world.

And if Genesis One isn't your cup of tea, Genesis Two describes a more personal God, but still one that brought order to the universe. This God was like a potter, and this God used hands to form us, and all parts of creation, and this God had an eye for detail. And even though the text doesn't say it directly, and even though we often trip up on the particulars of the Garden, and the choices of its inhabitants; this creation, and the creatures that filled it, were also very good.

But just as soon as Adam and Eve head east of Eden, and we turn the page to Cain and Abel, and the other stories of our faith, we long for a return to that noble, to that perfect, to that God-centered, new earth and new heaven the ancient writers described.

In today's passage, the author of Revelation describes a return to the world, and the humanity, and the God-centered reality we long for. And this passage is captivating.

I confess to you that I have little use for visions of rapture, or six-headed beasts, or tales of fearsome sea monsters, or fiery judgment. But I do know that, we, just like the earliest followers of Jesus, live in a sea of chaos that desperately longs for God's order.

And there are monsters: systematic hunger and poverty; the quicksand of partisan rancor; faith houses, especially those of people who don't look like us, victimized by hatred and gun violence; bullying in our schools that breaks lives and ends lives; the general sense that empathy and decency are no longer basic requirements of humanity, but rather something we aspire to, something we call noble and courageous. These monsters bring tears, and they cause pain, and they separate us from what is good and holy. And like our author, I, we, long for a world free of these things, a new heaven and a new earth.

And today, on All Saints Day, it is tempting to focus solely on the fact that those who have gone before us now reside in that New Jerusalem, a dimension free of pain and tears, and full of God. Let me be clear, I believe with all my heart, that our Saints now dwell in full and whole communion with our Maker, just as one day, we will, too. I cannot begin to describe the overwhelming goodness and mercy of such a place, or space, or time.

But my understanding of this New Jerusalem, let's call it a God-centered, God-intended reality, is more transcendental in nature. That is to say, I do not believe that there is a linear or spatial separation between our Jerusalem and the new one. I believe that the world Christ proclaimed, and the one Saints did, too, is always coming about. And one day, this old place will morph into the new one. In the meantime, we keep catching glimpses of that ever-becoming reality.

The Saints have been our glimpses of a God-centered reality.

*The home of God is among mortals. God dwells with them. And they are God's people. And God's got us, y'all!* You know how I know? Wise people told me so. Two Sardis women in their nineties, with the spirit of teenagers, and the energy of toddlers. Mirra Smith told me every Sunday, "God is here, Bob." And she sang out loud, and I can still hear her reading a Psalm:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; for their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God's law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. But woe be unto the wicked, for they are like chaff that the wind drives away.

And Carson Sholin told me so. She said, "Bob, God is in this place." And then do you know what she did? She drove down to Urban Ministry Center, and picked up six more homeless neighbors for Room in the Inn, and brought them to dinner. And I know God was among God's people.

*God will wipe away our tears.* I only got to know Betty Deason for a short while. But here's what I know. Not thirty feet from me, she wiped away the tears of dozens of children, not children anymore, as she spent each Sunday in worship care. And now the mothers of those children, and even some of those not-children-anymore, wipe away the tears of my little girl.

Our church is thirty years old. I've only gotten to be a part of it for one-tenth, about 150, of our more than 1,500 Sundays together. And I've only gotten to know personally a fraction of our Saints. But I know their names. And I have read their names. And I will speak their names.

Just like us, I am certain our Saints had their share of chaos monsters. But because of their labors, this community has heard the resiliency of God's everlasting yea over and above the tired and predicable nays of chaos. More importantly, we have heard. "I am love. I am hope. I am peace. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I am God. I am yours. And I am here, Sardis."

Our Saints have given us a glimpse of the New Jerusalem. And they've left each of us a labor: to be that glimpse for all whom we encounter. God is here, Sardis. Now go and be God's people.

May it be so! And may it be soon! Amen.