

Albany Presbyterian Church
November 3rd 2024

This reading from the Book of Revelation is one of the apocalyptic readings in the Bible that is often popular and being reconsidered at a time when it seems like the world is about to end. Chapter 21 comes in the context where the author previously talks about how God will destroy evil and sin and bring forth the new heaven and earth. And it gives a vivid picture of how God dwells in such a world without tears, mourning, crying, or death.

Like most of you, I have been grieved deeply about those people, almost 200 in number, who died in the flood in Spain; as far as natural disasters go, this was one of the most sudden, unexpected, and devastating natural events of the late.

So sad to hear the stories of how people met this freakish flooding unprepared. Then, there are wars in many parts of the world; many lives are lost in the senseless wars and conflicts each day. We are also coming out of the global pandemic and still coming to terms with the lives lost during this time. Life is so fragile, and we live in constant uncertainty of life and the world. Of course, apocalyptic readings like the Book of Revelation seem relevant to understanding how the Bible sees our lives in our current series of events.

In all these external things of the world, things out there, somewhere, the sadness of losses is deeply felt and experienced in our losses that happen closer to our lives. We all have experienced the loss of someone we love. Depending on our relationship with that person, grief comes in many different shapes and forms. I learned of the news that a minister colleague died suddenly last week. And previously... As a hospital chaplain, I have ministered to many who were losing or about to lose someone they love in death or tragic circumstances. At any stage of life, regardless of age, death comes to us all, some quite suddenly and tragically. And how do we make sense of these losses, and how do we make sense of life when these things are happening all around us?

As you know, each culture has its own way of grieving for the loss and mourning for the dead. After a person's death, the Jewish people spend seven days of mourning period. This is called Shiva. During such a time, Jesus entered the village of Bethany, where Mary and Martha, his closest friends, were mourning the loss of their brother Lazarus. Earlier in chapter 11, the sisters had called out to Jesus, but Jesus did not respond immediately. Seeing how deeply they grieve, John tells us that Jesus, in his humanity, is moved with tears and weeps in sadness, and we are told that he does this even though he is fully aware of what he can and what he will do with Lazarus, who was dead but will be raised later in the story.

It is helpful for us to think about this story from three vantage points. First, it is from the disciples' point of view, another from Mary and Martha's, especially Martha's, and lastly, from the point of view of Jesus. And some were the sisters' friends who watched Jesus calling Lazarus out from the dead. And I guess, if you are to consider the whole of chapter 11, there is also a point of view from the high priests and Pharisees, the religious leaders who felt threatened by what they heard and saw in Jesus and began to plot against to kill him.

The disciples were visibly afraid of the physical danger that Jesus and they would have to face if they were to go back to Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem. There, the people were about to stone Jesus in John 8 and John 10. Jesus was not so bothered, it seems, however. Danger or no danger, all he could think about was how to make sure they knew that he was the Messiah and had been given the power of God.

Jesus says this is why he did not respond immediately to the news that his best friend Lazarus was about to die. Jesus waits even longer and decides to see them after four days. For this reason, Mary and Martha greeted him with these words: "My brother would not have died if you were here."

It puzzles us and all the readers why he would delay and wait until Lazarus dies. Who can understand God's will? We also appreciate the one who said, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept his man from dying? In verse 37.

I am uncomfortable, and I hope you are, too. Jesus would do this to make a point—that He is the resurrection and the life. In verse 15, Jesus said, "For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so you may believe. But let us go to him."

Though he came as he did, when he got there, Jesus was moved by the grief he saw. In verse 33, Jesus is deeply moved by Mary and her friends from Jerusalem weeping and crying. In verse 35, Jesus weeps as he is near where

Lazarus is buried. How wonderfully comforting it is to see Jesus weep for those who mourn is one of the most compelling verses in the Bible, and we know where Jesus is when we are weeping and feel the pain and loss. He is right there with us in our tears and our sadness.

We do not forget that there was a point: perhaps the gospel wants us to know and never miss it. It is, after all, the most important point of the gospel. That we have faith in Jesus, resurrection, and eternal life. As Martha meets with Jesus even before he enters Bethany, she represents many of us. Martha, who has faith in God and all his promises, also knows that Jesus is the Messiah and He has been given the power of God. She speaks for all of us who know the theories and doctrines of faith; Martha says, "I know." She even confessed I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world, in verse 27.

But she also knows that after four days, the body decays, and the stench from the decomposing body in the Middle Eastern climate, even for the time of Jesus, would not be a bearable thing to endure.

When Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

Martha responded that she believed but perhaps did not realize what that meant until they stood before the tomb where Lazarus was buried, and Jesus was about to do something unthinkable. Only after seeing Jesus calling Lazarus out among the dead. She understood, and perhaps we will also understand what he meant: that the resurrection is not just a theory or an abstract metaphorical idea that will never happen; as Jesus said to Martha, "If you believed, you would see the glory of God? If we "believe," we will also see the glory of God.

This incredible story in John's gospel of Jesus raising Lazarus reminds us that Jesus has the power of God. Jesus came as part of God's plan to do something new so that those who die will be raised to be with him, as Revelation 21 says, where we will be restored or remade and dwell with God in the new heaven and earth. God is the alpha, and Omega is our being and our end.

So we confess (Confession of Faith)...