

June 28, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: Living a Dream or a Nightmare
Text: Revelation 21



News flash: the world didn't end on Dec. 21, 2012. You've probably already figured that out for yourself. Maybe you remember all the warnings leading up to the end of 2012- the prophets and websites announced the end of the world. For years leading up to 2012, we were warned of an ancient Maya prophecy predicting the end of the world as their calendar signaled, or the end of the world due to a mysterious planet on a collision course with Earth for 2012, or a reverse in Earth's rotation would cause all polarity on the planet to reverse. In spite of our best scientists, even NASA, telling people all these perditions lacked any scientific data, people still waited for the end of the world as we know it on Dec 21, 2012. Okay, so it didn't happen. Maybe those harbingers got the date reversed, was it a pre-apocalyptic dyslexia? Maybe it wasn't 2012, but 2021! in which case our experience in 2020 might make sense.

If we look back at ancient texts, people have been envisioning dramatic earth changes for ages. In John's vision of Revelation, he too sees the end of the world- as we know it, but he does not see the destruction of the earth as modern predictions maintain. Listen with me to the 21st chapter in the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Christian scriptures:

Rev 21: 10, And in the spirit the angel carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

22: 1-5 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

May we hear what the Spirit shows to us today.

John's vision does not leave a gaping void of life. John does not see cataclysmic planetary destruction. He sees a vision of glory and beauty of peace and justice replacing the domination Empire which was ruling. His 'end of the world' vision is the end of war and poverty and oppression and division and strife. It's the end of the suffering world and the beginning of the world God created.

Some have read John's Revelation in one of two ways, either they tell it as the great apocalypse end of the world story that crushes all, or they see it as a scene so imaginary and wonderful that it must not be of this world, so they have transferred it to a time and place far, far away and called it heaven. So many of our songs about this text are sung thinking that they are speaking of gathering at the river of life flowing out of the great throne as an

after-life experience of another worldly place known as heaven. But John's vision tells of a new holy city – not up in the sky waiting for us to die to arrive at the gates and try and answer St Peter's question right in order to pass go - but a new holy city coming down out of heaven *onto earth*. This earth. Earth is not destroyed; the way we live is transformed. This earth is the thin place where God's reign comes "on earth as it is in heaven."

The text says there is no temple in this holy city. We read, "I saw no temple in the city" and don't think much of it. John's listeners heard that; they got it. They are poking each other in the ribs and nodding their heads. There are a few 'amens' from the crowd and a chuckle from a few more. Rewind a few dozen centuries to understand the importance. Hebrews constructed a portable tabernacle as their center for worship while they wandered through the wilderness. God moved with the people; God sojourned with the weak and vulnerable residing in their portable tabernacle holy of holies, God in a Box, thinking the ark of the covenant held God's holy presence. Then they reached their promised land and they built an empire under King David, and his son built an elaborate Temple. Where they put the holy God box. the ark of God was housed in a fortress guarded by priests that was built at the expense of the people by the backs of the laborers and slaves. That temple was destroyed in war, but a new one was constructed as a symbol of power and national might. The Temple played a central role in the lives of Jews. The regular flow of income (temple taxes) enriched the institution and those who ran it. It became a powerful economic and political factor in Judean life. Preservation of the temple became the highest priority, so the leaders cooperated with the Roman authorities in taxing and suppressing their own people. The temple courtyards became a place to rip people off, especially poor people and out-of-towners. Remember how Jesus turned over tables and caused such a fuss in the temple? It was because the temple had become another oppressor of the poor and power machine of the rich.

John writes a vision of a new world order, of a heavenly way of being actually coming to pass here on earth, and there is no temple- no one religious institution that claims to have God all neatly boxed up in their building. No human authorities claiming special power relationship with God who can grant or deny others access to God's presence for a price. No sacred building to confine God's blessings. In one simple line, "I saw no temple therein" John announces the end of institutional religion that had become corrupt and the celebration of God's presence set loose right there in the middle of the New Jerusalem Holy City of God. The church, the temple, the mosque, the shrine, the monastery, the ashram- has helped the people to so live as Divine manifestations, that we realize God pours out into the world in so many ways- too big for any one building to contain.

John paints a spectacular vision: there is a river – the water of life – flowing right through the middle of the street, on both sides there is a tree bearing the fruit of life year round with leaves for the healing of the nations. And right smack in the middle of all of this is God. John carries us back to the first book of the Bible again with the recreation of the Garden of Paradise reimagined, re-genesis, a new Jerusalem. This describes a city where God's not put in a Methodist box or a Catholic box, or a Christian box, or a Hindu box, or Jewish or Muslim, or any box. This city of unity and wholeness. This is heaven on earth where the Divine flows through the center of all.

What do you see when you look into the future? What is your spiritual vision of the future? Is it the destruction of the earth? Fireball of death raining down? Or is it a New

vision, a river of life with leaves of healing for all the nations? Many have spoken of visions from God, where justice flows down like mighty flood waters to cover the land. Many have held visions from God of a day when a person is judged by the content of their character not the color of their skin or the dollars in their bank. Many have shared visions of the earth inhabitants caring for delicate creation, so her waters can flow clear again and creatures great and small are honored. Many have spoke their vision of God's preferred future where humankind awakens into her next level of consciousness and sees there is no separation.

What is your vision? What is your vision for your life's purpose? What is your vision for the hope of humanity? What do you understand God's vision? for the world? for spiritual communities- for people who gather for worship and transformation ?

Our vision of the future can be one of doom or one of grace. Only one of these has been passed down through the centuries as God's vision. Chances are we will create what we are looking towards, and we work for what we vision.

May God's vision for all - be our purpose, our hope, our future - realized. Amen.