

"Speaking with Grace"

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Montreat Youth Conferences - Weeks 3 & 4 Closing Sermon

Revelation 21:1-6 - A New Heaven and a New Earth

1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth,"[a] for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'[b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life."

It's Friday. It is hard to believe that we have come to this time in the week. Just five days ago we began a journey, a community of strangers and friends, tackling the adventures of seeking and being sought by God.

Over the past week we have shared a breadth of opinions, stories and experiences all expanding our understanding and knowledge of the body of Christ.

I am grateful for your willingness to engage with one another, to share your stories with myself and the other leadership of this conference and to hold with care the gift and privilege that is Montreat Youth Conferences.

From our morning keynotes where Meg and Jarrett helped us get into the life of Christ to music with Jeff, Rec with Patrick and Heather to our evening worship services exploring other aspects of Scripture, I hope we have challenged you to claim our time together as sacred, not just in geography, but in spirit.

- A place where you have been encouraged to question the preconceptions of the world, the struggles of the church and the very nature of faith.
- A place where communities have been strengthened: through the nuance and the complexity of our individual lives, the laughter and the tears of our heart felt emotions and the deepest yearnings of our souls for justice and healing in the world.
- And a place where the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been made real in the subtle whispers of the holy while on a casual stroll or in the broad horizons of the beloved community gathered to break bread.

This has been a holy week, indeed, and I thank you. And yet, it is time to move from this place of faith into the next stage of this adventure to which we are

all called. Tonight, I am also shifting gears during this time, gonna stay here in the pulpit and I share my hopes for you as you leave this place.

For our hopes for you to boldly embrace your faith and actively discern of God's signals in your life do not stop at the gate nor do we cease seeking a closer connection to God because our week is through. As we leave the sacred safety of this place, we must be ever diligent in seeking God throughout the rhythms of our life: the magnificent, the mundane, the mountains, the valleys and in the ordinary.

For the same hopes that we have had for this conference are had by God in our lives. To challenge assumptions, to struggle with faith, to glimpse the holy and to answer the yearning to know our place in the ever revealing of God's hopes for the world.

In these final hours there is a letting go of God's children, not only sending us into the world to claim our calling, but to diligently look over "the gap" and move forward from the way the world *is* towards the way God hopes it to become. 15, 75 or any age in between, claiming and living this calling on one's life to live one faith is never easy. Yes, even in the joyous glow of the last night of such a powerful and moving week, we are called into the world to be that a new heaven and earth.

This is where we visit our scripture this night, the culminating narrative of the Revelation to John, a vision of God's new heaven and new earth. A colorful and vivid account of the radicality of God's hopes and intentions for us all . . . a place where death is no more, mourning and crying will cease, where tears are wiped away and the brokenness of the world as we know it will be made whole.

- The battles between good and evil have been waged and won.
- The evils of the world have been cast out.
- The promises of God, in the life, death and resurrection in Christ have come to be in the returning of Christ to the world.
- And in this day . . . we come to know a new heaven and new earth.

Unfortunately, like much of scripture that is used as a weapon or instrument of fear, the coming of God's new heaven and new earth as told in revelation is often portrayed as the impetus to do things to avoid the wrath of God, rather than as a promise of what is to come to which we respond with gratitude and faith.

Some see this "new heaven and new earth" and the battles before as a climatic event that we can or should try to somehow predict with charts and equations, but I believe it is a constant unfolding of a new creation that God is laying out before us . . . each day ushering us into this calling, hoping that we will see and choose to be that new world that God intends and new heaven on earth

that we so yearn for.

But we must each now decide if, how and why we will accept this calling. For if you do choose to allow this promise to pulse through the blood of your faith, you will be challenged to remain vigilant, to remain steadfast and to not give in to those who would rather have you fulfill the negative assumptions about the ways of the world and the ways in which your generation understands life and faith.

This is particularly important for those of you who occupy this place in the world, called youth. You are a generation too often discounted in your faith, too often judged by the failures of past generations and too often discounted in the powerful ways in which you engage in the world for good. And despite those who would try to dissuade you from trying to be world you dream up, you press on.

I can guarantee that should you live and speak your understanding of a new heaven and new earth, at some point, someone will try to tear you down, trying to convince you that no matter how hard you try, "You will not change the world."

- They will say, "I once wanted to change the world and then reality hit."
- They will say, "It's great to be idealistic, but you'll grow out of it."
- They will say, "Make sure you make your money, find security, then you can do what you want."
- They will say, "It's no use, the world sucks, it's every person for themselves!"
- and the best one, "When you get older, you'll understand."

You must not buy into this false message of your ability to be those who God calls, NOR can you absorb the words, "I will change the world" in the abstract or theoretical and further suffocating God's hopes with mere words, ideology and good intentions.

You must be that new heaven and new earth in every part of your being. Your generation, the young people of this day, must lead the way in discovering this new heaven and new earth that unfolds before us, for you have a unique generational story to tell . . .

- you are a generation that has lived in a world and culture unlike any generation before you;
- you are a generation that has understood the global community in a way that mine never has;
- you are a generation that has experienced a technological boom that has changed the very nature of community;
- you are a generation that has danced around the edges of how the world better experiences differences: race, gender, sexuality and class.
- you are generation who, unfair and overwhelming as it might be, that I believe God is speaking through so the rest of the world may come to know a

new story of God.

But before you rush to God and say, "I'm in," remember that, unlike what has become of so many churches and church institutions, this is no glamorous, profit-building or even safe task.

John's vision of battles of the beast and the lamb, the destruction of Babylon and the creation of a new Jerusalem poetically communicate a sense of urgency of our call to be Christ's hands and voices in the world. The tensions between justice and injustice, good and evil, moral and immoral are real. Being called into the life of Christ can be hard on your spirit and conviction, and to think otherwise is naive.

You have a chance to be the presence of Christ in this reality and change it, but you cannot ignore the realities of the world that you are trying to change. It is a world that is filled with violence, greed, injustice, marginalization, apathy and downright destruction.

We see it all around us:

- Social discourse that is painted with vitriol and violence that tears down the very dignity of one another's humanity
- Ideological battles that are more concerned with individual political victory than improvement of the common good;
- Words and actions that hide behind theological freedom, but lead to violence of body and spirit.
- Cultural conversations that dismiss the realities of the injustice that still exists in society around race, gender, economics and sexuality.
- A world that seems to believe our number one goal is to win, to succeed and to survive no matter the pain caused to the environment, our communities or people half way around the world from us.
- Be optimistic, be hopeful, but do not be naive about the world into which you are being called . . . the world is a mess.

The brokenness of the world is no more evident in our our culture than in the ways we engage in the public conversations about faith, politics and culture. Every day as we muddle through the disagreements of life and faith: politicians, pastors and pundits choose the path of vilification, bullying and intimidation in order to advance ideology, theological party or personal gain.

So as the generation before you buys into this tact and perspective, it is in the very nature of our interaction that you can teach us something new. You can be the body of Christ that you have seen and been here, this week. The Body that has embraced the complexities of faith and made it to the other side of discernment. And the body who can let this new way of being infect the world

Yesterday we showed you a clip of Sue Sylvester in her most nasty side. Here in

another side of Sue.

Glee VIDEO - Showing Sue in another light as she visits her sister who has down syndrome.

You see, we too often create rigid boxes within which we place those whom we determine to fit that label. When we first saw this clip there was a cry from our couch, "Darn you Sue, don't make us see you as a real human being!"

The fuel that powers the destructive voices in the world is the ease with which we can compartmentalize one another, believing that any human being is one dimensional, define by one action, belief or instance: liberal, conservative; good, bad; faithful, unfaithful, etc. Absolute manifestations of good and evil are assigned to friend and foe and none of us are allowed the freedom to be the complex creations that God has so carefully knitted together.

This kind of dividing and judgement gives leaders of our society: pastor and politicians alike permission to engage in childish bickering and violent interaction to the detriment of the coming of God's new heaven and new earth and we dishonor the Body of Christ.

This is the language that has infiltrated far too many of our world's interactions and drawn our energy and attention away from the important work and life of the gospel. This constant yelling over one another, mocking the personhood of our neighbor and treating those with whom we disagree as mortal enemy results in the loss of our ability to see that it is through the hard work of discernment that we move closer towards knowing and living God's hopes for all of humanity.

We also become distracted from the deeper conversations about systematic and institutional change about poverty, injustice and exclusion. While we must care for the immediate needs of the world, we must, in concert, address the systems who's very life depend on the existence of poverty, injustice and exclusion.

We become defined by the divisions to which we ascribe. We begin to measure our worth by the depth of our division, letting petty battles become the mark of our community rather than the expansive love of God's gathered people.

We forget that our words having meaning, defaulting to and tolerating words of verbal, emotional and spiritual abuse rather than words of divine, holy and life-giving beauty.

And the worst is that we fail to grow into the kind of community which we have begun to glimpse this week. Rather than taking time to do the hard and faithful work of discerning through the difficulties of life, we make a willful choices to deny the dignity of another perspectives of faith, we taunt our enemies and we

essentially turn away from God and ways in which God would hope us to move.

So, as we both grieve the end of our time together and celebrate the new experiences of the divine, my challenge and my hope for you is this. To continue to hold in tension God's constant seeking of you with your own seeking of God's call to you. You must take what we have done this week, hold it with the care and love with which it has been offered and be God's people even when the world may so seductively and socially plead with you to let your life be driven by the ways of this world and not of God's

- Take the experiences of this week and give them feet. Take the lessons and practices of incarnation, discernment, discipline, community and evangelism and make them your own, not only in the things you DO, but in your very being and faith.
- Embrace the gift that has been given to you here and see the privileges that you hold in the places where you live around culture, class and economics, not using this privilege for your own gain, but for the fulfillment of God's kingdom.
- Be confident, passionate and convicted in Christ, not arrogant or boastful, but full of the knowledge of God's claim on your spirit.

I have no doubt that, as God has done all week, God stares into this, our sacred gathering, strangers and friends drawn together for a brief moment in our collective journey of faith. God hopes, yearns and again pushes us into the world to be God's people.

As we go, hear again that what the world needs today is not another generation driven by good intentions, idealistic words and dreams grounded in self preservation. For we must all claim the calling to make a difference in the world, serving with a joyful sacrifice of those things that trap us on the wrong side of the gap. We must not stand on the sidelines of our faith, remaining silently clothed in the comfort of our status or the privilege of our station, but we, people of faith, must speak out to ensure that God's new heaven and new earth are made real by the living of our lives.

Created, claimed and called by God, we are being freed this night with a hopeful abandon into a world desperately in need of knowing at the core of its global soul . . . a new way of being a new heaven and new earth . . . a new way of being the world.

- a world where seeking justice is not a luxury only for times of plenty, but a passion that drive our lives;
- a world where compassion for the enslaved is not a liability, but a calling to answered;

- a world where having hope for a better tomorrow is not just a dream, but a reality to be lived;
- a world where extending civility, kindness and a generosity of Spirit are not weaknesses to be avoided, but strengths to be lived.
- and a world where we know at the very core of our spirit that in the eyes of God, we are orphans no more;

So I hope you are ready, this beloved body of Christ seeking and being sought, ready to go into the world proclaiming and living God's new heaven and new earth for all the world to see and to know.

Let's Go. Let us Pray.