

“Redeemed”

Revelation 22: 1-6

This week, we reach the end of our summer Sabbath series. It is my hope that we have all taken this time to renew and to refresh our world weary souls. Because I have to tell you, that is what we need, what the world needs us to do more than ever. The world needs us as people of faith to be the calm in the eye of the storm of divisive politics and name-calling. The world needs us as people of faith to serve others while remaining focused and centered on God’s direction for our own lives. As people of faith, we need to be the ones who are creating atmospheres of peace, atmospheres of sanctuary, atmospheres of wholeness in a world that is so driven to continue the cycle of hurt and hate. It is my hope that we as the community of Midway Christian Church have taken the last few months and somehow, someway incorporated the practice of Sabbath keeping into our lives so that we can continue to have the strength and the courage to be the people of love and grace this world so desperately needs us to be right now.

I have to admit that when we began this whole Sabbath keeping experiment a few months ago, I did it for selfish reasons. I brought it forward because I thought it was what we needed as a church. I thought we all needed a few weeks to

recharge, to stop and refocus. I thought we all needed some time to simply stop and just be for a while. My hope was that we would all take a few months of rest and renewal so that we could come back in August, ready to start visioning where God is leading us as a community of faith. I won't deny that this is still my hope and my plan for our church. At some point in August, the leadership team and I will get together and will begin having this conversation.

However, even though I started out this Sabbath experiment with one purpose in mind, I discovered something else along the way. I discovered that as usual, God had something else in mind: something bigger, something better; something that expands the visioning process beyond just our community of faith to include all of our mission to make the Kingdom of God a reality here on earth for all of God's people.

Let me explain: I picked out this Scripture from Revelation weeks ago because well, it is a great vision piece. It wraps up everything so nicely. This text provides us with a positive reminder that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, something we need to keep in mind as we vision together as a community of faith. My thinking was, "Let's end this series with this vision so that when we start our conversations about the future for Midway Christian church, we will have John's vision in front of us, sort of like a beacon of light, guiding us, pushing us to

become the community of faith God is calling us to be. Sounds good, right? As I always say, there is usually a method to my madness.

But then I realized that God always thinks bigger than our own limited human visioning. In living with this text this past week, and listening to what is happening in the world around us, I began to understand why the Book of Revelation has this vision of the Kingdom of God as its ending.

John did so to give all the people of faith, people from the beginning of the Church to people some two thousand years later and beyond, John gave us this wonderful healing vision of the Kingdom of God to hold onto in times such as these, these times when it seems like our whole world is breaking apart piece by piece with every new and brutal act of violence and hate. John ended his story with a reminder for all followers of Jesus Christ that God will always have the last word and that word is a word of love, a word of grace and a word of hope.

You see, John gave his community, gave us as modern day disciples this vision as the end all be all vision to remind the people of God why we do what we do. We don't practice our faith just for us. We practice our faith to remind ourselves of our wider connection to all of God's people, to all of God's creation. At the very heart of our faith is a call to heal all the nations. At the very heart of our faith is the joy of living as people who have been redeemed by God's grace

and God's love. John gave his community, gave us this vision so that...now here is the important part, so that we would always remember that love will overcome the darkness, no matter what.

This vision from John is not just about Midway Christian Church figuring out the next steps on our journey as we strive to live out our mission of WELCOME. This vision of the river of life, flowing through the city, washing everything clean, this vision of the tree of life, bearing fruit for the healing of the nations is about knowing that we have a promise that one day, this will not just be some words written down on paper. We have a promise that this vision will become a reality for all humankind, for all of God's creation.

As people of faith, this is what sustains us. This is what inspires us. This is what challenges us to become the people God created us and calls us to be. Knowing that one day the Kingdom of God will be made real here on earth and there will be peace. There will be joy. There will be no divisions or separations, no sorrow or hurt. We have the promise that one day all will be made whole, redeemed by God's grace and love.

It is this vision of wholeness that gives us hope to continue the journey. It is this vision of life that reminds us no matter what the world may say, we know that

any and all acts of love are not useless or pointless. They are ways that we can work with God, work through God to make this life-giving vision a reality.

This is what leads us and guides us day in and day out as people of faith. This is what shapes us and transforms us. This is the very basis for how we live out our faith: the understanding that it is not about us. Our mission, our work as Kingdom people is about concern for the orphan and the widow. It is about welcome for the stranger. Our mission and our work as Kingdom people is about care of God's creation and loving one another just as God has loved each one of us. Put all these things together, and they become ways that we live out our faith day in and day out, working with God, working through God to make John's vision of healing and wholeness a reality here on earth for all of God's people.

I'm not telling us anything we don't already know. Each and every one of us is here because we have had a life transforming experience with God's grace, with God's love. This amazing life changing experience opened our eyes to the numerous possibilities for hope and peace that surround us each and every day. We are here because each one of us had an experience that redeemed us, that made us holy, that inspired us to embrace the challenge to live in a distinctive, loving, grace filled way. We are here because we have experienced the power and presence of the Spirit of God.

That is why we keep this vision of new life always in front of us. That is what it means to be the people of God. That is what it means to live out our faith. When we say we have been redeemed by God's grace and God's love, what we are really saying is that we understand that God will have the last word and that word will be a word of hope, a word of peace, a word of love.

By keeping this vision of the river of life always in front of us, we hold on to the understanding that we are not just in this for ourselves. We are working together with God and with one another to make this vision of healing and wholeness a reality for all God's creation.

But...But...even as life-giving, even as life-transforming as this vision is for us, we will be the first to admit that it can also be overwhelming. More often than not, it becomes too much. It becomes too big. It becomes too daunting and we start feeling spiritual fatigue. We began to feel compassion drain. We become cynical and hard. We become apathetic to the needs of others. We become numb to the many injustices that fill our world.

Too often this life giving vision becomes too much and we realize that we don't have the energy or the strength to continue the journey.

And unfortunately when this happens, when we don't have the strength or the energy to continue the journey of hope, the storms of divisiveness grow

stronger and stronger and this life giving vision slips further and further away from becoming a reality.

And I honestly think this is where we are right now as the wider Church, as the Body of Christ. We are worn out. We are tired. We are world weary. And unfortunately given the darkness that seems to be overtaking our world right now, this is a very dangerous place for us to be right now. Please don't think I'm talking about politics. That is a separate conversation. When I refer to being in a dark and dangerous place right now, I am referring to the fact that it seems like our whole world is caught up in a storm of fear with no hope of it passing. It seems like there is no atmosphere of calm and stability for anyone right now. We are all being pulled this way and that and we cannot seem to get our feet underneath us.

It is disorienting and confusing time for all of us. It feels like we are swirling and swirling around right now, becoming so dizzy that we can't seem to figure out a way to get off this topsy turvy ride. It is almost as if our whole world has chose to go at this break neck, crazy speed and will continue to do so until something breaks. My worry is that when we reach this point of unsustainable craziness and fear, what will get broken is this vision of healing and wholeness that binds us together as all of God's people.

Unfortunately, even as I see this disruptive and disorienting path that our world seems to be on right now, I can't tell you that I have all the answers to how we can stop the storm of fear. But I can tell you that for me, during this Sabbath experiment, one thing became very clear about our mission and work as Kingdom people. I realized that no matter how hard we try, and no matter how many programs we create, we cannot sustain this life-giving vision on our own.

Depressing right? Actually, no because, for me, in taking this time of Sabbath, in taking this time of rest and renewal, I was reminded again and again that the only way this vision of healing and wholeness, this vision that guides us and leads us, this vision that is very heart of our faith, the only way this vision of the Kingdom God being made real here on earth can be sustained is by...as weird as it may sound...is by us taking a step back and re centering ourselves in the presence of God. That's the only way we can become centers of calm in this crazy world.

This vision of healing and wholeness, this vision which inspires us to be the people God created us to be can only be sustained if we as people of faith take the time to rest, and refresh our spirits. This vision that promises us the river of life washing us clean can only be sustain if we as people of faith take a little time for some R&R:

Take some time to remember the Sabbath, take some time to rest in the quiet stillness of God, take some time and respect the belief that we are all made in the

image of God, take some time and release whatever prevents us from being the people God calls us to be, take some time and reduce the violence and hate that seems to be overtaking the world, take some time and restore all as a Beloved Child of God made well, take some time and renew our connection with God's creation.

For us to be centers of peace and calm, for us to have the strength and the energy to create atmospheres sanctuary and wholeness, we as people of faith must practice a little R & R. That is the only way we can continue the journey, can sustain the vision. It is the only way we can experience the redeeming grace of God's love. It is by practicing a little R & R that we as people of faith become one step closer to making this vision of healing, this vision of wholeness, this vision of new life a reality for all of God's creation.

I wish that I could offer up some really great illustrations on how the practice of Sabbath has changed the world but unfortunately, I couldn't find any. I'm not sure if this is because this whole Sabbath Keeping is "new" to us as modern day people or if I just wasn't able to find any. But one thing I do know is that during these past few months, whenever I would tell someone about our Sabbath experiment, the person would always say the same thing: "I wish my church would do that. Let me know how it goes."

To be honest, I don't know if I have any idea of how it has really gone for us. I can only speak to how it has changed me. This experiment has reminded me that "it helps now and then to step back and take a long view. "To remember that we plant the seeds that will one day grow, that we water the seeds that have already been planted, to remember that we lay foundations that need further development. This Sabbath experiment has helped me to remember that I cannot bring about the Kingdom of God on my own but what I do have is a promise, a promise that this is only the beginning, that everything I do as an act of grace, as an act of love is one more step along the way, one more opportunity for God's grace to enter in and transform me, to transform us, to transform the world.

This Sabbath experiment has helped me to remember that God is God and I am not. And I give thanks for that each and every day.

This Sabbath experiment has also helped me remember that every time we take time to reflect on God's work and renew our connection with all of God's creation, we are one step closer to making the Kingdom of God a reality here on earth for all of God's people.

So maybe the lesson this morning for me, for us is instead of looking for grand examples of how Sabbath is changing the world, maybe I need, maybe we need to start remembering how God's grace has changed us. Because maybe then

and only then can we truly bring God's vision of healing and wholeness to life.

May it be so. Amen.