

Can We Find a Better Way of Viewing the Future?

Revelation 21: 1-6

The timing of this question was nothing that I had planned given the marking of the 18th anniversary of September 11th this past week. As we remembered that day 18 years ago, we as a nation were again confronted with the stark realities of life and the vulnerabilities of life that we all face as individuals. This significant anniversary called us to remember and to imagine a future where all are living in peace.

Which brings us to McLaren's oddly worded question. At first I didn't get what McLaren was asking because I have only really thought of our future as people of faith in one way...a time when the Kingdom of Heaven is fully present here on Earth. However, in reading McLaren's book, I realized very quickly that we were starting this conversation in two very different places. McLaren comes from a background which is very different from mine. He grew up in a tradition that when discussing the future, held to the belief of a literal rapture.

And to present a non-bias view, I need to admit that this understanding of a literal rapture is new territory for me. I was raised Disciples of Christ and within my background, there wasn't much talk of hellfire and damnation nor was there an expectation of a literal rapture. It just didn't line up with mindset of the Disciples

which values reason over emotion. As I shared earlier this week, it wasn't until seminary that I encountered probably for the first time someone who was raised in such a tradition.

Which means I need to say that I am relying heavily on McLaren to help us with this question. McLaren shared that the belief in a literal rapture is based on Paul's words in first Thessalonians, Chapter four, those words being:

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,^[g] about those who have died,^[h] so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.^[i] ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.^[j] ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

McLaren shared that these words have been interpreted within the Christian faith over the years to mean an actual rapture, in which “true” believers will be

snatched up to heaven, leaving empty cars crashing on the freeways, and kids coming home from school to discover that parents have been taken to heaven while they have been left behind. McLaren goes on to say that at the age of eight, he came home to an unexpected empty house with locked doors. He sat on his back porch, deeply dejected and filled with raising panic that the Rapture had occurred and that he had been left behind. He shared, “Who knew a third grader could feel such terror and despair?”

However before we scoffed at this idea or dismiss it as “nonsense”, McLaren cautions us who are unfamiliar with such an understanding of the future to realize that it is very much a part of the culture of some churches. And that this understanding is complicating many, many of our conversations surrounding social issues because those who hold to the belief of the literal rapture also hold to the belief that there is no point in caring for God’s creation here and now. After all, it is all going to be destroyed anyway. So why bother caring about clean water or clean air, why bother making justice for the poor, why bother tearing down the barriers used to divide us from them. We aren’t going to be here. We are going to be in heaven while others are left behind, people who have not proven to be faithful to God.

Again, on the surface, this may all seem harmless as something the wider Church disagrees on again, but as McLaren points out, this understanding has

become a significant factor in the internal and “foreign policies of the richest, most consumptive, and most well armed nation in the history of history, and that’s where things get even scarier than empty cars crashing on the freeway and kids coming home to find out that they have been left behind.”

Let me stop right here and please hear me say biblical scholarship and Christian tradition never denies that we believe some future event will result in the personal presence of Jesus within God’s creation. Each and every week, we prayer the prayer that teaches us to say: On Earth as it is in Heaven. That is our hope. That is our vision. That is what continues to strengthen us as people of faith.

“The New Testament, building on ancient biblical prophecy, envisions that the creator God will remake heaven and earth entirely, affirming the goodness of the old Creation but overcoming its mortality and corruptibility (e.g., Romans 8:18-27; Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17, 66:22). When that happens, Jesus will appear within the resulting new world” Everything will be restored. Everything will be made well. Everything will be made whole.

And that’s where our text for today comes into the conversation. In Revelation, one of the craziest books when it comes to eschatology, or the theology of “end times”, Eschatology is one of those fancy church words we can use to

impress our friends or win at Jeopardy. It comes from two Greek words which mean last and study.

In Revelation, the book we usually turn to when we think about the “end times, God doesn’t destroy the world. Rather, we are told God comes down to dwell with God’s people, reminiscent of the Exodus when God’s Spirit dwelled in the tabernacle, reminiscent of when the Word Became Flesh and dwelled among the people. We are told that God comes to dwell in and among the people of God, that God’s presence is fully realized here on Earth, that chaos gives way to order, just like it did in the first story of Creation.

What Paul says in Thessalonians, what Jesus says in the Gospels, what John says in Revelation, is that in the future, what will occur is not the destruction of God’s creation but rather a transformation of it where all is made whole, where the wrongs are righted, where what was broken is restored and all live in the light and love of God.

That’s why we say as Christians, as people of faith, we live in this here but not yet experience. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know death will not have the last word. We know darkness will not have the last word. We know that God is present here and now, actively working to bring healing and wholeness, not to a select few but to all of God’s children.

Yet we also know our present reality is not what God fully intended when God called creation good...not when there is pollution destroying our environment, not when there is poverty eroding the quality of life for so many, not when there is injustice, hurt and hate filling our streets each and every day.

Revelation shows us that when God say that there will be a new heaven and a new Earth, that doesn't mean we get to wash our hands of the brokenness here in our communities. It is simply means that we know this world does not have the last word. God does. And it is a word of love. A word of mercy. A word of grace.

As people of faith, we hold onto the promises given to us by our God, a promise which empowers us to never settle for the narrative of power and might but rather celebrate the narrative of how the weak will be made strong, and the humble will be lifted up. As people of faith, we know how the story ends....a restored Creation made new through the grace and love of God.

This is our future. However, this is also our present. As the people of God who pray each day that one day on Earth as it is in heaven, we continue to work to make this vision a reality. Yet we know that the completion of this vision is not up to us. It is up to God.

So in the meantime, while we wait for it to be on Earth as it is in Heaven, as people of faith, we hold secure to the promise that God is our beginning and our

ending. We hold to the promise that God is at work in this world, bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's people. We hold to the promise that love and light will always have the last word.

This is what we know to be true as ones who hope for God's Kingdom to be fully realized in our midst. And so that is why we continue to live out our call to always remember, to always be shaped and informed by this vision of healing and wholeness for all of God's people so that one day it truly will be on Earth as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.