

“Dwelling”  
*Faithful Stewards of God’s Infinite Grace (1 Peter 4:10)*  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
Sunday, November 1, 2015  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

Brett Blair shares this story about a radio station that ran a contest a few years ago:

“Disc jockeys invited their listeners to tune in their clock radios. ‘Just for fun,’ they said, ‘when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you’re the third caller, you’ll win \$106.’

“It didn’t take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. The first morning, a buoyant disc jockey said, ‘Caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?’ A groggy voice said, ‘Do I smell coffee burning?’ Another day, a sleepy clerical worker said, ‘Oh no, I’m late for work.’ Somebody else said her first words were, ‘Honey, did I put out the dog last night?’ A muffled curse was immediately heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, ‘No, you didn’t.’ It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience.

“One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang. ‘Good morning, this is FM-106. You’re on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?’

“A voice with a Bronx accent replied, ‘You want to know my first words in the morning?’

“The bubbly DJ said, ‘Yes, sir! Tell us what you said.’

The Bronx voice responded, ‘Shema, Israel ... Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord

is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.’ There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the radio announcer said, ‘Sorry, wrong number,’ and cut to a commercial.”

The man from the Bronx takes his faith in God seriously.

David H. C. Read, in his book, Overheard, suggests that today’s new-style hypocrites are not religious people like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. Today’s hypocrites are secular people who pray, “God, I may not be the best person in the world, but at least I’m better than all those religious hypocrites in the Church.” These same secular hypocrites say of the Sermon on the Mount, “That’s the kind of life I lead; so I don’t need any of the proffered resources of religion.”

One of Read’s chapter titles goes like this: “I live a pretty decent life: What more do I need?”

As we reflect together on stewardship over the next four weeks, we will be talking about this issue. “I live a pretty decent life: What more do I need?” We will be talking about Christian commitment, which is about money, yes, but so much more.

The first “more” that we need beyond our pretty decent lives is to have an understanding of suffering.

Most of us cannot really relate to the sufferings of the early Christians. We may suffer, as all people do eventually. Or, if we haven’t suffered, we have heard of the sufferings of others, and we know that we are not immune.

But none of us is in danger of being terrorized and persecuted for our faith.

## **I. Suffering and Grief.**

By contrast, the starting point for the book of Revelation is suffering. The Revelation to John of Patmos is an apocalyptic writing, filled with descriptions of present sufferings and

visions of future hopes. The Christian community is in hiding, in fear for their lives.

John is exiled to a penal colony on the island of Patmos during a time of great persecution. He likely awaits execution as he writes his Revelation. The emperor Diocletian asserts state control in violent and brutal ways: Christians are “being covered with pitch, tied to stakes, and set afire as human torches... [or] wrapped in the skins of dead animals then left to be set upon by wild dogs... [or] dragged into the arena to face lions.” (David E. Leininger). Jews who have become Christians under a brutal Roman regime, they live in fear. And yet they remain fiercely faithful to the one who has become their true identity, Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith is serious business. It’s not something we do on Sunday morning because we’re “good people.” The Church is not a charity organization to help us feel good about ourselves.

The Christian faith is about life – how life most passionately lived is rooted in Christ.

Roger A. Ferlo of Virginia Theological Seminary comments:

“To hear this reading [from Revelation] is to hear a summons to solidarity with all those who have suffered in their witness to Christ – whether in the farthest reaches of the first-century Roman Empire or in the drug-ridden streets of an American slum; whether on an abandoned road in Central America or in the faceless precincts of a Burmese prison. When a part of the body suffers, all suffer – their tribulation is ours, and so is their hope.”

As members of the body of Christ, we share in the sufferings of all the saints, past, present and future. And we share in their hope as well. We belong to a family of faith, the community of the church, the communion of the saints down through the ages.

Recalling the suffering of the saints who have gone before us can put our own suffering in perspective. It can help us to know that we are not alone. Others have suffered, too; some

have suffered horribly. If God was with them, then God is with us, as well.

“I live a pretty decent life: What more do I need?”

The first “more” that we need beyond our pretty decent lives is to have an understanding of suffering.

The second “more” that we need is the knowledge that God is with us.

## **II. A New Vision.**

God is with us in all our suffering and grief. Today we remember and honor loved ones who have died. God is with us in our grief. Our God is a big god. He has known many sorrows; he knows our sorrows. Whatever we are going through, God has been there. God is there, with us, as God has been with those who have suffered over the centuries.

The Christian faith is about death – how we face our own deaths with courage and with the assurance of God’s love; how we endure the deaths of those we love and those we admire by keeping alive the vision: that their lives are not negated by the tragedy of their deaths; that their new lives, gathered around the throne of God, wrapped in light and love, are too beautiful to fully comprehend.

There’s an old story about that most famous of saints, Saint Paul:

“Legend has it that a wealthy merchant traveling through the Mediterranean world looking for the distinguished Pharisee, Paul, encountered Timothy, who arranged a visit. Paul was, at the time, a prisoner in Rome. Stepping inside the cell, the merchant was surprised to find a rather old man, physically frail, but whose serenity and magnetism challenged the visitor. They talked for hours. Finally the merchant left with Paul’s blessing. Outside the prison, the concerned man inquired, ‘What is the secret of this man’s power? I have never seen anything like it before.’

“‘Did you not guess?’ replied Timothy. ‘Paul is in love.’

“‘The merchant looked bewildered. ‘In Love?’

“‘Yes,’ the missionary answered, ‘Paul is in love with Jesus Christ.’

“‘The merchant looked even more bewildered. ‘Is that all?’

“‘Smiling, Timothy replied, ‘Sir, that is everything.’” (shared by G. Curtis Jones)

John of Patmos is also in love with Jesus Christ. This love sustains him in a time of brutal repression under Diocletian.

Like Paul, John is most likely awaiting his own death by execution. The vision John shares with us under these dire circumstances has been a source of hope at Christian funerals since ancient times. In John’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth, we join with the saints of old in living in the constant presence of God in Christ Jesus. God dwells with us. God pitches his tent with us. God takes up residence in the spare bedroom. God is no longer separated from us. There is no longer a need for a temple from which to call on God’s presence. God is with us face-to-face in the new Jerusalem.

The saints no longer experience mourning or crying or pain. God has wiped every tear from their eyes and death is no more, for them. And we will share with the saints in this new freedom from mourning and crying and pain and death. Pain and death are wiped away by the presence of God, who will dwell with us, and we will be His people. No more God in heaven and us on earth; God will live with us in the new Jerusalem come down from heaven and established on earth forever.

John sees the Lamb, Jesus the Christ, seated on the throne. And John hears His voice: “‘See, I am making all things new. Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true. It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’”

## **Closing.**

In his book, David H. C. Read quotes one of the shortest prayers he has ever heard:

“Almighty and everlasting God...Help!”

Whether we are hypocrites in the pews or hypocrites in secular society; whether we believe fiercely and fervently in Christ or look askance at passionate faith – this prayer is one that comes to us in our darkest hours. When a loved one is sick and dying; when we ourselves are in physical or emotional pain; when life seems like it can’t get any worse, most of us cry out to God: “Help!”

John of Patmos reminds us that our help can be found in the constant presence of God. Take comfort. We are part of a great company of saints. Jesus, the light of the new Jerusalem, lives in our midst, through the power of his Holy Spirit. He is with us in our suffering and grief. He is making all things new. Because Jesus dwells with us, we can freely, with joy. We are secure in him.

Amen.