

May 8, 2022

**“Hope Is the Thing with Feathers”  
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

*Scripture Reading*

**Revelation 21:1-6**

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride and groom adorned for their wedding. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*God will dwell with them;*

*they will be God’s peoples,*

*and God will be with them and be their God;*

*wiping away every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away.”*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also,*

*“Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then speaking to me said, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”*

**Sermon**

You may be scratching your head and asking what the Book of Revelation and an Emily Dickinson poem written 17 or 1800 years later have anything to do with one another, the answer is hope.

We have been watching the Apple TV series called Dickinson, it is so weirdly brilliant and might just give life to Emily’s poems for the next generation because it is a mash-up of the language and music of today’s young people with the culture of mid to late 19th century New England.

We learned that the backdrop to Emily Dickinson’s poem on hope is the Civil War. She is trying to make sense of how messed up the world is, how messed up people can be and so she goes through a period of Writer’s block. At this point, she has lost several of her male friends to the war and she is feeling useless and weighed down by the futility of it all.

What seems to be clear her from this block is an incident that occurred at the funeral for her cool Aunt. She is standing there despondent at her Aunt's graveside when a little yellow finch alights on the coffin. Feeling like she has been visited by her Aunt, her hope is restored. She then goes on to accept that she can't fight in the war, she is awful at sewing and has no nursing skills but her poems can give people hope and so she writes.

“Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,  
And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
I've heard it in the chillest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.”

When I was a Hospice Chaplain I often heard stories and witnessed them, that a person passes and suddenly their favorite bird shows up, or a butterfly, I have heard countless stories of hummingbirds or the sound of a mockingbird in the distance. I know some of you have experienced this, and I share this with you not to lessen your experience but more to validate it. Even in our darkest moments, hope shows up and it is often a thing with feathers.

Music was my Mother-in-law's life. She loved all kinds of music and it was her career and the language of her soul. When she passed away, as we walked out of the care facility in the wee hours of the morning, a flock of wild geese with the moon on their wings passed overhead. We felt her as if she were standing right next to us. In the darkest time, hope rises.

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson argues that hope comes into its own when crisis looms, opening people to new creative possibilities. She goes on to say that with great need comes an unusually wide range of ideas, as well as such positive emotions as happiness and joy, courage, and empowerment. God gave us the ability to hope even when it seems like there isn't any. It perches on our soul and sings without words.

Having hope pumps chemicals through your brain. These chemicals can block pain and accelerate healing. Hope, which involves belief and expectation, causes the brain to release neurochemicals, which actually mimic the effects of morphine.

We all need our hope, especially in the hard times. I have a playlist that seems to go off in my mind when I start to feel hopeless, it includes “The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow,” “There’s a Place for Us” from WSS, “O-Oh Child, Things Are Going to Get Easier,” Dolly Parton’s, “Hard Candy Christmas” from the Best Little, Lady House in Texas and Bob Marley’s “ Everything’s Gonna Be Alright.”

On to the revelation of John. You have heard me say a million times that it is so important for us to understand what is going on around the scriptures to even scratch the surface of their meaning. Just like how we might think Emily Dickinson’s poem is just sentimental until we hear that it’s written in the middle of the Civil War as she receives daily reports of friends that have been killed.

So since it had been a while and admittedly, I sometimes skip over the Book of Revelation when it comes up in the lectionary, I thought I should practice what I preach and read it again. I was sound asleep before I finished the first page. It is just really hard to follow and is very nonsensical to my 20th-century brain.

Yet this book is probably the most misunderstood, misquoted, and weirdest book in our collective writing, and as such, it’s been used to predict the end of the world, over and over again and usually blame it on someone who is already marginalized.

In my lifetime alone I’ve heard people say the end is coming because women are working outside the home and because of the hippies. The end is coming because of promiscuity, because of politics, because of the gays, and so on and so forth and they usually back it up with a quote from Revelation. Because when something is nonsensical it can mean anything.

The talk of the end of times historically always ramps up in the bad times– during plagues, wars, oppression, depressions, and recessions. Apocalyptic literature dates back millennia in all religions and cultures, and there are several parts of our scriptures that have this kind of prophetic feel to it.

But what is important isn’t all the stuff that is violent and awful and zombie inspiring, what is important is that so much apocalyptic literature ends with hope. Because that's what we do, that’s what helps us to survive all the awful stuff is to imagine and to hope for a time that will be better.

Theologian, Luzia Rehmman put it this way, “In all the apocalyptic writings there is the moment of decision in which it is up to us whether the reign of God will break in or be delayed. God is thus dependent on humanity’s cooperation.”

That’s important, humanity plays a part in whether it is the end times or not. God isn’t our puppet master controlling every event in history, because we do have that choice to be a part of the problem or a part of the solution. That has never been truer than it is now, between our nuclear arsenal and our inability to slow climate change and the devolving of democracy.

We have to have an alternate vision to give us hope and John comes through in spades for his people and consequently for us. Listen to what happens when we put John’s words into this moment, our moment in time:

God will dwell with us;  
we will be God’s peoples,  
and God will be with us;  
wiping away every tear from our eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”

We don’t know much about John, but what we do know is that he isn’t John the Baptist, or one of the disciples but he is most likely a prisoner or at least exiled on the Island of Patmos.

Patmos was a penal colony for the Roman Government. He could have been sent there because of his faith in Jesus, or most likely because he claimed to be a prophet. The Roman authorities didn’t tend to like the prophets because most of their predictions included the destruction of the oppressive and violent Roman empire. John does just that by proclaiming that the end is near for all the powers built on injustice. Not the end of the world mind you, but the end of the powers built on injustice.

What we know also is that one way or another he suffered and witnessed way more violence than any of us should ever have to, and in the midst of that, in the midst of his darkest moments, he finds hope, and through his writing he passes on that hope to others.

We know that he is well-traveled, for John is concerned with the seven early churches in Asia Minor and addresses each of them in his writing. He starts each address with “The angel of the church of...Ephesus, etc...” “ I like the idea that John saw each church as having its own angel

watching over it. How does this sound... “To the angel of the church of Parkside Community UCC” watch over us.

Another thing he wrote was that God said, “I have set a door before you that no one is able to shut”. That gives me hope. No matter how we interpret or ignore this text, God has set a door before us that no one else can shut.

We get to walk through that door at the end of our life, no matter who we are, and we can walk through it with our prayer and meditation and with our hope, right here and now. AMEN

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