

Living Toward the Future

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

January 3, 2016

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Proverbs 29:18 (The Message)

If people can't see what God is doing,
they stumble all over themselves;
But when they attend to what he reveals,
they are most blessed.

Acts 2:14–21 (NIV)

¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷"In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Revelation 21:1–7 (NIV)

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And 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 or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

⁵He 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."

⁶He 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. ⁷Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

What lies ahead in 2016 and beyond? What is our part in God's future?

January is a time when we freshen our resolve to live and love better than we have. It is a time to reflect on the future, to sharpen our vision, to embrace anew our goals. That is true as much for St. Andrew as it is for any of us. What does the future hold for us? How would God have us shape our future? How will the Holy Spirit use us this year to build for God's kingdom? All of our Scripture passages this week are about grasping what God has done, is doing, and will do to bring about the full realization of his kingdom. We begin with the first believers, who were called to hope even in the midst of ridicule and oppression.

At last

After Jesus' ascension (his return to the Father), the believers returned to Jerusalem to wait. There, they stayed together and devoted themselves to prayer (see Acts 1:12-26).

They also had to restore the circle of Jesus' closest disciples to twelve by replacing Judas Iscariot. Just as there were originally twelve tribes of Israel, the inner circle of disciples had to be twelve, representing the restored Israel. So they cast lots (rolled dice!)¹ and Matthias was added to make twelve again.

The believers prayed and waited, but I wonder what they thought would happen next. Jesus had said that the Father would send them the Spirit, who would teach them everything and remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26). Whatever the believers imagined, I doubt it quite measured up to the dramatic reality of that Pentecost day.

The believers were all in one place on that day. It was early, about 9am. Suddenly, there was the sound of a huge wind and tongues of fire leapt from believer to believer. These were theophanies, dramatic manifestations of God. God was suddenly with them in a way that God had not been with them before.

The Holy Spirit, God-present, then gave each believer the ability to proclaim God in languages they couldn't know. It would be like me suddenly preaching Sunday's sermon in Russian. What they said wasn't gibberish; rather, it was the undoing of the multiplicity of languages following God's destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It signified the restoration of God's creation, which God had already accomplished in Christ though it was not yet fully consummated.

Peter, now empowered and led by the Spirit, then rose to speak to everyone within shouting distance. You can bet that the commotion caused by the believers and their astonishing language skills had drawn a big crowd from the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival. Peter began by invoking the words of the prophet of Joel, for what was happening that morning was not merely a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised the disciples, it was a fulfillment of the story told by Scripture. Indeed, God in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit, had stepped into space and time to restore and renew his creation, as God had promised he would do. The Day of the Lord had arrived. It might not have looked like what everyone imagined it would, but God's victory over sin and death had been won, shaking the cosmos to its very core.

And so our own hope and vision must be grounded in confidence, the sure fact that God has acted, that God has won, even as we struggle through the death throes of a sinful world. For God is bringing forth a new heaven and a new earth.

The Holy City comes to us

One of the things that should surprise you the most about Revelation is that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes to earth, not vice versa. The story doesn't end with God's people being spirited way to some distant spot in the cosmos, but with heaven coming to earth. I am pretty sure this is *not* how many Christians envision eternity. Don't we head off to spend eternity in our true home, the "place" we came from? No. That is Plato creeping back into things again.

In Revelation, the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the Holy City comes here! The city comes down out of heaven (21:10). N. T. Wright, one of the foremost NT scholars of our day helps us to grasp this crucial aspect of John's vision:

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. No: they are different, radically different; but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And, when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God's project is going forwards; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God's will for creation.

¹The casting of lots put the decision in God's hands so far as the believers were concerned.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn't mean, as I have stressed throughout, that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel's vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual center stage, there is no Temple in this city (21:22). The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary. As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.²

The End is a Who

I suppose we can't help but think of Revelation's conclusion as "The End," like the final credits that roll at the end of a movie. Certainly, the Bible helps us to grasp God's story and our place in it. As Wright puts it, we are the ones in the story between Acts and Revelation. And, yes, one of the many gifts the Jews gave us all, as Tom Cahill put it, is the knowledge that we are headed somewhere, that history has a destination.

But we should never forget that at "The End," stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted in John's visions. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God's promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God's colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever.

And so we love and we help and we build and we give and we . . .

What's your vision for St. Andrew? What is your part in God's glorious drama? What does God hope for us and from us?

God promises Abraham that all the families on the earth will be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Micah brings God's promise of a day when swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4). Isaiah brings the promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where there will be no infants who die young, where lions and lambs will feed together, where people build homes and plant crops (Isaiah 65). These are all images of God's creation as God intended it. This is the hope to which God points us. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the new heavens and the new earth; it embodies God's victory over death.

It is because of Jesus' resurrection that we can come to our God-given work confident that it is never in vain. The empty tomb is the concrete proof that God's victory has been won and that it will come to its full and glorious consummation. Our part now is to press ahead without fail, to do all that we can to excel in building for the kingdom of God. And in this, the Spirit of Christ strengthens and encourages us so that we might be bold like Rahab, obedient like Abraham, and forgiving like David. Always inviting, always worshipping, always giving, always serving . . . always and in all things. None of it goes to waste.

² Wright, T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (116–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives. Even in our prayers, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, expressing to God what we cannot (Romans 8:26-27). Yet, for many of us, God's Spirit is relegated to no more than a still, small voice, robbed of any real power. When do you most see or feel the Spirit at work in our congregation? How can we go about fostering a life of the Spirit at St. Andrew? How can we foster a life of the Spirit in our individual Christian walk? To what sort of future is the Spirit leading us? Be specific – what would you like to see from St. Andrew in 2016? What will be your part?

2. The resurrection hope is grounded in God's material creation, this cosmos in which you and I live. What is God's work in which we are to excel? To what does God call us? What responsibilities has God given us? Is it only "church work?" What, specifically, are you doing now, this month, this year to build for the kingdom of God? To put it another way, what are you doing in the *present* because of our *future* hope?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Genesis 2:4-25 The Garden of Eden and the tree of life	Tuesday, Exodus 33:12-23 Moses beholds God's glory, but cannot see God's face.
Wednesday, Isaiah 65:17-25 Isaiah's vision of the new heaven and new earth.	Thursday, John 4:1-26 Jesus offers the water of life, the living water, to a Samaritan woman.
Friday, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that collectively and individually they are God's temples, made so by the Spirit. The temple was where God was present with the Israelites. The Spirit is God-present.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We will begin the book of Jonah on January 11

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We will begin a study of Philippians on January 12

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

These classes will not meet the week of Jan 3

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning January 10, a new series:

The History of Heaven