

1 Sermon, December 30, 2012

Texts: Revelation 7:13-17, Isaiah 65:17-25

Title: "Endings Are Beginnings"

We human beings have a deep desire to have things make sense.
We'd like to meet God and ask some questions.
We'd especially like to ask God about the meaning of things.

But since none of us has a perfect relationship to God, there are many questions left unanswered. The Bible does not answer every question we have, either. In fact, the Bible has questions of its own. The book of Job is filled with questions.

I am an occasional Science Fiction reader. It's not my steady diet, because I like non-fiction and Christian books and mysteries, too.

The thing I like about Science Fiction is that it can ask a lot of deep questions without getting dry and boring.

In 1949, George Orwell wrote the book "1984," and it presents a society dominated by a political party bent on controlling people at many levels. They intentionally rewrite history to conform to the party line. Everyone is monitored, and society is controlled by a subtle fear.

George Orwell got people thinking about the limits of control that a society can impose on its members, and asks what the price of freedom is.

I remember a Star Trek Next Generation episode, where the starship encountered a society where everyone was euthanized upon reaching the age of 60. It raised a lot of end-of-life questions.

Science Fiction helps us imagine humanity in different circumstances. Science Fiction helps us ask the "what ifs."

What if there are beings more powerful than us?

What if literature were banned or burned?

What if people could live forever?

How would we start a new society on a new planet? How would we feed ourselves, govern ourselves, control reproduction, protect ourselves?

Science Fiction helps us imagine a future very different from our own life right now.

2. Isaiah speaks of a renewed people

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In some ways, Isaiah and Revelation do the same thing. They help us imagine a future as God would have it.

And, like Science Fiction, Revelation and Isaiah are not too concerned with individuals. They are concerned with large groups of people. What would the world look like if God takes over?

We tend to read the Bible from a very individualistic perspective. How does God save me? What does that mean for my life?

But Isaiah has a very different perspective.

It talks about a vision for God's people where they will all live to be as old as trees, where neither women or children die in childbirth, and the people's work is effective and their prayers are fruitful.

Isaiah's vision of what God has in mind for us is the renewal of creation – the snake will eat dirt. No one will hurt or destroy.

It's the Reversal of what happened in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were disobedient.

3. Revelation speaks of a new creation

Revelation is even more like science fiction. There are great beasts (a staple of sci-fi), thrones, crowns, and things get worse before they get better.

The picture here is again of a group of people, the faithful who have endured. The faithful have washed their clothing in the blood of the lamb, and it comes out sparkling white. In other words, they have become pure because of Jesus Christ.

These faithful people will not be hungry or thirsty anymore. That means they *had* suffered hunger and thirst. But they will be in a new creation – a renewed heaven and earth.

4. Your calling is always about relationships

We're almost at the end of the year. Tomorrow is the last day of 2012. We will do our end-of-year giving, get involved in tax preparation, finish off the season for the Badgers and Packers, make plans for the future.

You may even make a New Year's resolution or two.

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Your resolutions may be things for yourself, like losing weight or quitting smoking. But if you want to make a Biblical New Year's resolution, it has to be about more than just you. It has to be about something involved in your relationships to others, or even making a contribution to society as a whole.

You see, God's got a destination in mind. God has a purpose for this world that Isaiah and Revelation can only give us the simplest sketch of. God has a deep desire for there to be no more hunger, no more thirst. People will work and they will enjoy the fruit of their labor. It is not just for a few, but for the heavens and the earth – for everybody.

God wants us all to be healed, whole and forgiven.

God wants us made completely new, together. In Matthew chapter 9, Jesus tells about what it means to live as a follower of Jesus:

"Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.'" Matthew 9:14-17, NRSV.

How do you make sense of the part about wineskins and cloth patches? I think that Jesus is saying that things won't work unless we're in it together. New wine, which will give off gas, has to be put into a new wineskin, so it won't explode. So the wine and the wineskin have to match up. They need to be new together. If one part is made new but the other is not, it doesn't work.

I think that's about relationships, how we are the wine and wineskins and we need each other. Personal new year's resolutions that don't take my neighbor into account are like new wine in an old wineskin.

The same with patches. They need to match. You need to put pre-shrunk cloth patches on pre-shrunk clothing. When you put the patch and the clothing together, they are made new together.

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The story about Christmas seems like a lonely story – and it probably was lonely. But there are threads of relationship and support all through it.

Mary's cousin Elizabeth is supportive of Mary. The shepherds come and worship Christ. And in the temple, when Jesus was eight days old, both Simeon and Anna came to tell Mary and Joseph that this was a very special baby.

The story of Christmas is about new beginnings – not just for a young couple from Nazareth, but for people around them, and for the whole world. It is still for the whole world.

Faith is about relationships. In a word, it's about love.

The love of God has been poured out on us, and sharing the love, spreading the love is what we're called to do.

Jesus told his disciples about it in Matthew 10:

"These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment." Matthew 10:5-8, NRSV.

That's still our calling. It is to give ourselves away so that we are all transformed.

"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" Revelation 7:13-17, NRSV.

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17 I am creating new heavens and a new earth; everything of the past will be forgotten.

18 Celebrate and be glad forever! I am creating a Jerusalem, full of happy people.

19 I will celebrate with Jerusalem and all of its people; there will be no more crying or sorrow in that city.

20 No child will die in infancy; everyone will live to a ripe old age. Anyone a hundred years old will be considered young, and to die younger than that will be considered a curse.

21 My people will live in the houses they build; they will enjoy grapes from their own vineyards.

22 No one will take away their homes or vineyards. My chosen people will live to be as old as trees, and they will enjoy what they have earned.

23 Their work won't be wasted, and their children won't die of dreadful diseases. [a] I will bless their children and their grandchildren.

24 I will answer their prayers before they finish praying.

25 Wolves and lambs will graze together; lions and oxen will feed on straw. Snakes will eat only dirt! They won't bite or harm anyone on my holy mountain. I, the Lord, have spoken!

"I discussed peer pressure and cigarettes with my 12-year-old daughter. Having struggled for years to quit, I described how I had started smoking to 'be cool.'"

"As I outlined the arguments kids might make to tempt her to try it, she stopped me mid-lecture, saying, 'Hey, I'll just tell them my mom smokes. How cool can it be?'"

"The teacher in our Bible class asked a woman to read from the Book of Numbers about the Israelites wandering in the desert. 'The Lord heard you when you wailed, 'If only we had meat to eat!' " she began. "Now the Lord will give you meat. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, or ten or twenty days, but for a month—until you loathe it."