

“Former Things”
Revelation 21:1-6a
All Saints’ Sunday
November 3, 2024
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

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 adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
he will wipe 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 he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

There are few things I love more than a good story. Whether it is told in writing, in a podcast, in film; whether it is shared over a cup of coffee or on a phone call or by campfire-light; told by the young, told by the elders, told by someone I know, told by a stranger—stories are powerful, and I love them.

When I was a child, my grandpa Bob would read to me from anthropologist and folklorist Andrew Lang’s *Blue, Green, and Red Fairy Books*. The folk stories collected in these books from the British Isles to eastern Asia and across India and throughout the African continent. Tales like “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” “Snow White and Rose Red,” and “Rumpelstiltskin” awakened my imagination. Grandpa would check off the stories that we had read together, sometimes putting a star by the stories I liked especially well.

But, like the stories of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, the stories Lang collected were not always simple and moral, and sometimes contained characters or events that were strange, unsettling, and even gruesome. And, though I to this day am not one for horror stories in book or film form, I remember not being overwhelmed by the fairy stories that sometimes took on fearsome forms. Perhaps it was because I knew my grandpa would protect me

from whatever monster might jump out of the book and threaten to eat me. Or perhaps, I was acquainted with the format of fairytales enough to know that things pretty much wound up ok, or even very well, in the end.

Biographer Roger Lancelyn Green contextualized Andrew Lang's work by reporting that he "was fighting against the critics and educationists of the day" who judged the traditional tales' "unreality, brutality, and escapism to be harmful for young readers, while holding that such stories were beneath the serious consideration of those of mature age".¹

"Unreality, brutality, and escapism": those words could easily be applied to a multitude of stories collected in the Biblical canon, and particularly so to the book at the end of the Christian testament, the book of Revelation. But do those descriptors necessarily mean that the stories should not be given serious consideration, by those immature and mature alike?

David S. Cunningham writes in a commentary on this passage about the roles of "stories of origin" and "stories of destination" in mythology and legend. He reflects that humans have told both kinds of stories for eons, as ways of remembering the past and ways of envisioning the future. The Christian story, told via the Hebrew Bible and the writings of the Christian New Testament, serves these same purposes. Cunningham says,

"Just as the book of Genesis is meant to help us understand our origins in the broadest terms, so the book of Revelation is intended to help us understand our ultimate destination. The answer to both questions—where we are from and where we are headed—is the same: God. Our ultimate origins are in God, and our ultimate end is in God as well."¹

Though we are not part of a tradition that recites creeds, I often think of these words from the United Church of Canada's confession of faith: "In life, and in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to God."²

On All Saints' Day, stories of origin mingle with stories of destination as we call the names of the saints and recall their trajectory from birth to death to whatever lies beyond, communion with God and with the cloud of witnesses.

And when we read Revelation, we are, in a sense, listening across time and space to the stories of people long gone, people who grasped tightly the truth that the Holy is the origin and destination of all Creation. The author of Revelation, John of Patmos, recorded in this text a vision from among a people who lived through great suffering...in our modern Bibles and in this place today, we hold their most dearly-held dreams. Roger A. Ferlo writes in a commentary on our scripture passage that, though we don't know everything about the lives of those in the 2nd century CE living under Roman occupation, "we do know how they imagined their freedom, should it ever

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4

² <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/new-creed-1968>

come. And even after two millennia, in this startling vision of God’s triumph, contemporary Christians can catch a glimpse of their own fears and their own hopes.”³

Of course, we must be careful with any story, because stories are never neutral. Ferlo reminds us, “Divine revelation, in whatever form it takes, and whatever the source, can be dangerous stuff—the stuff of ideology and violence.”⁴ The book of Revelation is a dangerous book, and we don’t have to look too far to confirm its use for unjust, and even bigoted, purposes.

Ferlo continues:

“The images and obsessions of the book of Revelation have perhaps wreaked more havoc in people’s lives—created more strife, fomented more demonic fantasies, misled more people—than any other book in the Bible...The book of Revelation has been used to justify all manner of things: revolution and counterrevolution, anti-Catholic polemic, Christian Zionism, pietistic quietism, sectarian violence. The book can be a happy hunting ground for bigots and fanatics, and the distortions of its purpose and its meaning are as rampant today as they were two millennia ago.”⁵

We do not have to look far for those who are using these stories this way. Looking for Revelation’s signs and symbols of the coming end of days among the clamor of the upcoming USA election continues to solidify the power of Empire...this time the American one. Assigning goodness and evil to people based on irresponsibly allegorizing the groups in the text uplifts our modern racist and xenophobic narratives. Instead of running our own way with this text, we need to come close to those who would have been the earliest receivers of this text—what might the words of promise for a renewed, vibrant Creation hold for people who saw land laid waste following regional conflict? What might an affirming voice on a heavenly throne mean to the peasant class, or those incarcerated, or those enslaved?

Like my beloved fairy stories, Revelation’s author used imagination as a tool to share some deep truth about humanity, to envision a world beyond the scope of his community’s current reality. For people living in challenging situations, whether it was persecution by Emperor Diocletian or life as a peasant in the middle-ages, stories enabled them to reach beyond their current circumstances to a place and time where their suffering would be lessened, when justice would be done, when the present challenges were but a memory that could be described as “the former things.”

René Such Schreiner write in a commentary on this passage,

“Along with the first century communities John of Patmos [the author of the book of Revelation] was writing to, we are living in and through these “first things.”

³ Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4

⁵ Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4

We might think of these things today as political upheaval, war, gun violence, exploitation of children, genocide, rampant xenophobia, dire mental health issues, fanaticism and fundamentalism.

Schreiner continues, “It is a difficult thing to live with death and mourning and crying and pain, and this is why John narrates the end of the story for us. Knowing the end of the story equips us to live through suffering without corruption: without falling into complicity with the systems producing and benefitting from that suffering. Note that nothing in our passage indicates that knowing (read: “believing in”) the end of the story somehow magically exempts us from suffering. This is consistent with the entire book of Revelation: it does not tutor us on how to avoid the suffering the first things bring, in and of themselves. Rather, John narrates the reality of suffering and empowers his hearers to live into and through that suffering with integrity—as followers of Christ, to the end. Knowing the end of the story is key to living through the first things with integrity.”⁶

Each year on All Saints’ Day, we call the names of those who have died since the last All Saints’ Day. We remember their names, their faces, the sound of their voices, the way they made us feel, the place they held in our lives, and even the place they occupied in this very sanctuary.

Among us this day, we remember Hank, a saint of great integrity, who pushed through barriers to pave the way for Black law students all over this country. We remember Janet, a saint with a great care for those experiencing homelessness, rising above challenges within her own life to organize support for neighbors living with so much less. We remember Dennis, a saint who always noticed when someone needed a little help during worship, who faithfully stewarded the Companion ministry, and who would be making sure all of us gathered here who were eligible were registered to vote this Tuesday. We remember Dick and his watercolors, and Ron and his love for Godspell, and Virginia and her long membership in the group called simply “The Group” that supported one another for decades. We remember Kathy and her passion for education, and Gay’s deep pastoral heart, and Jerry’s inclusive spirit. We remember David and Claudia and so many, many more saints who have touched our hearts through their lives lived with integrity, despite and through all the different types of challenges they faced.

And all over the world, this act of memory is an act of solidarity, as we remember with our global Christian community those who have died this past year, those who are now resting in the arms of that Love Beyond All Loves, Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer of us all. From Seattle to Paris to Gaza to Sao Paulo to Johannesburg to my hometown and your hometown, we call names who now surround us in that “great cloud of witnesses” that we feel through the thin veil between this life and the next.

Again, Roger A. Ferlo writes,

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-revelation-211-6a>

“to hear this text on All Saints’ Day 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.”⁷

Beloveds, your hope is my hope is the hope of strangers across the world. And theirs is mine and is yours. Together we can look at those first things with open eyes and with compassion in our hearts, as we return to the powerful stories that have confounded and encouraged and shaped us. The stories of Revelation, the stories we inherit from Christ-followers who have gone before, are tales of triumph over the death-dealing powers of this world. The ones who have told these stories, who endured the first things and lived into a future that strove toward the vision of the beloved community, have now passed away. Their origin and their destination are one and the same, their story's beginning tied with their story's ending.

Now the storytellers are among the saints, and WE are the storytellers. Now the former things of our saints are our present things, and our present things will become former as we live day in and day out creating the world as it CAN be from the world that IS. The stories our saints told us, the stories our saints lived, now enter the realm of memory, where somehow things are the most truly real.

“Death and crying will be no more, for the former things have passed away.” This is not a denial of grief or a sentiment to ward off mourning. This is part of a vision of a world in which grandpas protect granddaughters from monsters popping out of their fairytale books. A world in which oppression and suffering and violence are distant memories; a world where peace through justice reigns; a world where love characterizes all relationships; a world where Creation is renewed and restored and re-storied for many generations to come.

For all the saints who from their labors rest, we bear witness to their lives well lived, tell again what they told us, and continue their work of following the way of Love, Justice and Peace in this world. And we proclaim, this day of all days, that in life, and in death, and in life beyond death, the saints and you and I all belong to, belong with, God.

May it ever be so. Amen.

⁷ Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 4