



Critical Presence Revelation 21:1-5, 22-26

Prepare a worship and reflection space with a picture (for example the one below), sculpture, or some other object that represents loving presence. You may want to include a candle holder with lit candle to symbolize the presence of God in our midst.

Open with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:

*O Immanuel,
You are God with us.
Help us sense your unfailing presence.
Draw us closer
to your heart
that our hearts
may beat with yours
as one.
Lift the veil from our eyes
that we may share your vision for the world.
Give us clear and receptive minds
that we may hear
the word you speak to us today
through John's inspired dream –
a sacred vision
of the world as it should be
and is becoming,
by the irresistible power
of your love.*



Congolese Christians welcome visitors from the United States.

Read Revelation 21:1-5, 22-26

Discuss the following questions:

In v 5, the “one who is seated on the throne” says, “Look! I am making all things new!” How, if at all, is this different than saying “I’m making all new things”?

Is God looking to “renew” the world or to destroy it? How should that affect the way we view the world?

In popular portrayals of “the end times” the faithful are often described as “going up” to heaven to live with God while the earth is destroyed. Which direction do things go in this story? Do people “go up” or does God “come down”? What difference, if any, does that make?

In Genesis 11, the people of “Babel” try to build a tower so they can “go up” to heaven to live like gods. In Revelation 17-18 the colossal achievements of “Babylon the great” come crashing down, and in our verses today, God makes all things new. How does the vision of Revelation 21 compare and contrast with the story of “Babel”? What do you make of the similarities and/or differences?

The New Revised Standard Version translates the first part of v 3 this way: “See, the *home* of God is among mortals. He will *dwell* with them.” The Greek root translated as “home” (*skene*) and “dwell” (*skensei*) in this verse is the word that the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, uses to translate “tabernacle” (*mishkan* in Hebrew). Revelation is saying that in the renewed world God’s “tabernacle” will be among human beings. God will “tabernacle, pitch tent, camp out” with them. What do you make of that?

Take a look at what Numbers 9:15-23 says about the tabernacle. Is it a fixed and permanent structure or is it mobile, meant to be put up, taken down, and moved?

Where were the people during tabernacle times in the Hebrew Bible? Were they settled in or on the move?

What does God’s presence in the tabernacle mean for Israel’s journey? for the direction they take?

What does Revelation mean when it says that in the renewed world God’s tabernacle will be with human beings, God will “pitch tent” with us?

What does that mean for how we should think of God’s relationship to human beings? What does it mean for how we should treat fellow human beings? What does it mean for how we should think of the church and its mission? What does it mean for the structures and institutions we build?

In v 22, John says, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” What do you make of that? How does that relate to v 3’s assertion that God will “pitch tent” with the people, that God’s “tabernacle” will be among mortals?

If we want to “find God,” where should we look?

V 23 says the city (New Jerusalem) has no need of sun or moon because the glory of God is its light and the Lamb (the Crucified and Risen Christ) is its lamp. Vv 24-25 say that the kings of the earth will bring their glory into the city, whose gates will never be shut by day -- and there will never be night there. What’s the significance, if any, of the gates to New Jerusalem never being shut?

In chapter 22, John is told that the time for these things is “very near” and will be accomplished “soon.” In other words, this vision is in the process of being fulfilled in John’s here-and-now. What would it mean for us to take seriously the notion that this vision of the world is coming true in our here-and-now? What would it mean for us to live as if God were renewing all things and “pitching tent” with human beings even as we speak?

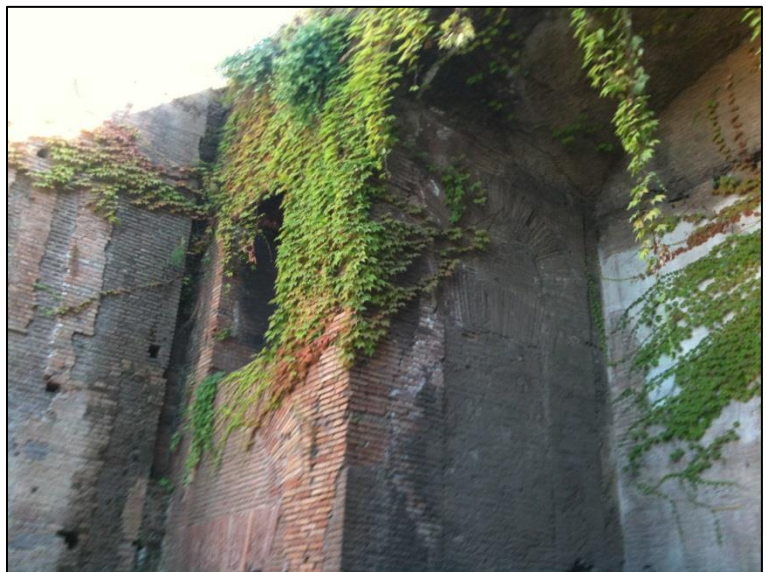
A few comments about Revelation as a whole, followed by a couple of comments on today’s verses

Some things about the book of Revelation

- Today’s passage comes toward the end of a long, spectacular, often bizarre vision given to a Christian mystic named John on an island off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea toward the

end of the first century. The vision is an “apocalypse” (*apokalypsis*, Rev 1:1), which means that it is an “uncovering” or “unveiling.” The idea is that history as we know it is just the surface of a much deeper, more important reality. John’s heavenly guide “uncovers” things, throws off the veil, lifts the hood so the churches can see the divine engine of history at work underneath.

- The vision is in fact a series of visions. Each one builds to a climax that’s cut short by the start of another vision. The cycle repeats until it’s finally resolved with the destruction of “Babylon the great” in chapters 17 and 18. This narrative technique holds the tension high, but it also makes it hard to follow the action and keep clear about the characters, since the same basic groups appear in different forms as the visions proceed. So we have, for example, Satan, the Devil, the dragon, the ancient serpent, Babylon the great, and the woman who sits on the beast with seven heads and ten horns, but it seems that all these characters are kind of the same thing. That’s because they pretty much are.
- Chapters 17 and 18 make it clear that “Babylon” is Rome and “the beast” is its imperial military, economic, and political power. Revelation tells the story of a cosmic battle between the Crucified and Risen Christ and the awesome imperial power of Rome, a battle between the “rule of God” and the “rule of empire.” The fact that Rome is portrayed as “Babylon” and “the ancient serpent” implies that Roman imperialism is just the current manifestation of an imperialist “spirit” that has taken a variety of shapes through the centuries.
- There is a close relationship between the letters to the churches of Asia (Minor) -- i.e., western Turkey -- that open the book (chapters 2 and 3) and the visions of heaven that follow, starting in chapter 4. The letters describe a situation where Christians are struggling to respond to the pressure they feel to participate in patriotic rituals at local imperial temples. Some Christians have landed in jail and a couple may even have died -- whether at the hand of the state or of a patriotic mob, we don’t know. Some say it’s too dangerous not to offer a public display of loyalty to Rome by making sacrifices at the imperial temples, apparently arguing that that would be OK since we all know that Caesar and Rome are not really gods. Christians can get their empire-loving neighbors off their backs by doing their patriotic duty “with their fingers crossed.” John says that such thinking is idolatry, describing it with the traditional prophetic imagery for idol worship: “fornication, adultery, prostitution.” The compromisers are “Jezebels” and “cowards” who practice “abomination.”
- A careful reading of the heavenly visions that begin in chapter 4 shows that they are, in many ways, allegorical commentaries on the issues addressed in the letters of chapters 2 and 3. An analogy would be how the color portion of *The Wizard of Oz* relates to the black-and-white portions at the beginning and end of the movie. Hey, doesn’t that mean lady on the bicycle



A portion of the ruins of one of the homes of Caesar on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

kidnapping Toto look a lot like that wicked witch flying on a broom? And that scarecrow and wizard surely look familiar! It's the same kind of thing in Revelation: the heavenly visions are "the land of Oz" to the letters' "Kansas." The larger-than-life characters in heaven correspond to the various forces at work in the difficult circumstances the churches face in late first century Turkey.

- It's also clear that John believed that all the things described in this vision would happen "soon," not in some distant future hundreds or thousands of years later. These are things in John's present and near future, not, for example, in our present and near future, two millennia later. John is writing to show his first century audience "what must soon take place." "See, I am coming soon!" the Risen Christ says to the churches of ancient Turkey. Just so his readers will get the point, John quotes Daniel 12 and gives it a twist. The angel had told Daniel to "keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end" (12:4). The implication, of course, is that whoever first published the book of Daniel thought "the time of the end" had come -- that was somewhere between 167 and 164 BCE, by the way. But John is on a much tighter deadline. There's not enough time to seal the book and wait. "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near!" (22:10). "See, I am coming soon!" (22:12). "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely, I am coming soon!'" (22:20). John and the churches of ancient Turkey were living in the "end time" now, at the end of the first century! Obviously, that raises the question for us as we read this revelation 2000 years later: what exactly does "end time" mean? And what should we make of literature like this when the "end time" it describes wasn't exactly the end -- or, at least, it wasn't "soon" or "near" in any normal sense of those terms? Whatever John and the churches in ancient Turkey thought, how should we read and use this vision today?
- In an important sense, the entire message of Revelation is summed up in John's description of the opening vision: "I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw someone like a Human Being, clothed with a long robe with a golden sash across his chest... In his right hand he held seven stars... he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Don't be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.... the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches'" (1:12-20). Though we can't see it with our normal sight, in fact the Risen Christ stands in the midst of the churches, holds the spiritual powers that protect them in his hand, and is present to them even as they live through difficult times. This is a book about presence -- powerful, critical, life-giving presence. Hang in there! Don't fear! The one who conquered death is here with us!
- Perhaps that message helps us answer the questions we asked above: what does "end time" mean and how should we read and use an ancient "end time" vision like Revelation today? Perhaps anytime the church struggles to live faithfully in dangerous, turbulent times, we are living in "end time" conditions and need to be reminded of the deeper spiritual truths that ground us. The fear and uncertainty, the everyday struggles to keep the faith may distract us, divert our attention from the reality of God's presence in our midst. These ancient "end time" visions can help us "lift the veil" of uncertainty, hopelessness, and fear to see the deeper truth: the Risen Christ stands in our midst. The one who died and now lives forever holds the keys to Death and the power of life. So we need not fear.

A few observations about today's verses and "critical presence" with the church in Congo

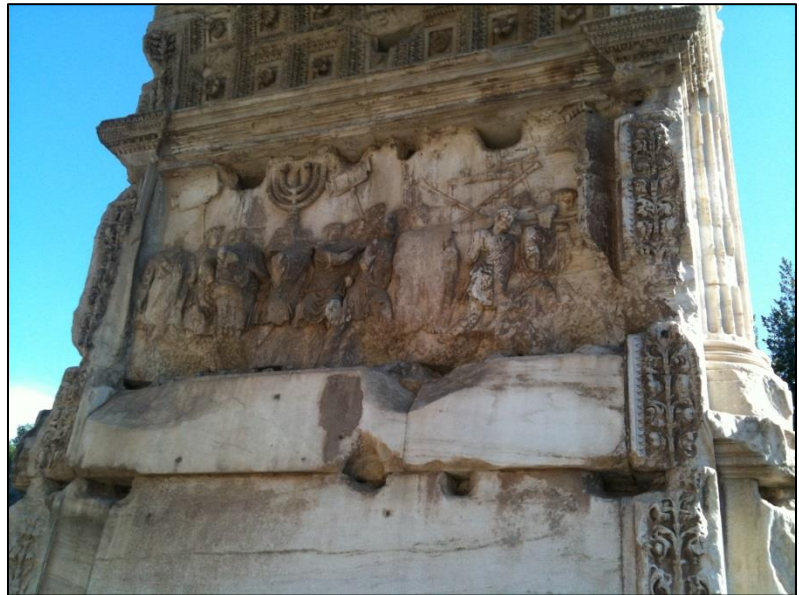
Today's verses come as the climax to a vision that has just described the spectacular collapse of Roman imperial power. Rome and the international political-economic order built around it are thrown into a lake of fire. The "kings of the earth" and "captains" of commerce who have benefited from imperial power join Rome in its ruin. And finally Hades, Death itself is cast into the lake. Death dies -- once and for all (20:14)!

Our passage today describes what happens next. A new heaven and new earth appear because the imperial heaven and earth have collapsed and disappeared. "The sea," an ancient symbol of the primordial waters of chaos that had to be "tamed" for an orderly world to arise, no longer exists (v 1). New Jerusalem "comes down from heaven from God" (v 2). And a loud voice proclaims that God is setting up a tent, a tabernacle among mortals. God will pitch tent with them and be their God (v 3).

This amazing image recalls Israel's wilderness wanderings after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt and before they entered the land of Canaan. Once they settled in Canaan, they built a temple for God in Jerusalem. But while they were on their journey out of Egypt, God camped with Israel as they moved about. God's presence was focused in a "tent of meeting," a "tabernacle" that the people packed up and moved with them as they went. Once a temple was built in Jerusalem, the people had to come to God. But in the days of wilderness wandering, God came to the people and lived in their midst, guided them on a daily basis, went where they



A view of the Roman Colosseum and the Arch of Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Jerusalem temple and later became emperor. The Colosseum was the scene of elaborately staged slaughters of slaves and prisoners of war -- a form of popular entertainment.



A stone carving celebrating the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. This is on the Arch of Titus, just outside the Colosseum in Rome. Notice the menorah the soldiers are hauling away. Construction of the Colosseum was financed, in part, by the loot Titus took from the Temple. Notice the crumbling state of the arch and, for that matter, the Colosseum in the previous picture. John was right: empires are not eternal.

went. John envisions just such an intimacy and immediacy of presence in the “New Jerusalem” that will emerge from the ashes of the empire’s collapse. It will be a city where there is “no temple... for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (v 22).

If the majority scholarly opinion is right that Revelation dates from the final decade of the first century, the absence of a temple in Jerusalem reflects the reality known by John’s ancient audience. In 70 CE, the Roman general Titus -- later named emperor --breached the wall of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. It was never rebuilt.

The absence of a temple is not a problem, in John’s view. Ironically, it’s a sign of a new era of God’s presence among the people. What looked like a great imperial victory is in fact the harbinger of a new world beyond empire, a world of God’s intimate and unmediated presence.

The new world post-empire is a world that confronts pain and suffering with healing and life-giving care. Closer than our very breath, God “will wipe away every tear” from our eyes. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” God will give water to the thirsty (v 6) and life to the lifeless.

A curious thing happens as the vision of New Jerusalem continues. The city, without temple -- because God is immediately present everywhere -- and without need of sun or moon -- because the glory of God is its light and the Lamb is its lamp -- now welcomes “the nations” and “the kings of the earth.” The last time “the kings of the earth” were mentioned in Revelation was back in chapter 19, when the imperial beast was thrown into the lake of fire and the kings of the earth “were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse (i.e. the Risen Christ) -- the sword that came from his mouth” (vv 17-21). But now in Revelation 21, the nations walk by the light of New Jerusalem, and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it (v 24)! The gates of the city are always open because “there will be no night there” (v 25). As we read on in Revelation to the verses that immediately follow our passage, we discover that “the tree of life” grows on either side of the “river of life” that runs through the middle of New Jerusalem. “And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (22:2). This perhaps explain the curious contradiction that “kings” and “nations” killed by the “sword that comes from the mouth” in chapter 19 (a “sword” made of words, not a sharp metal blade) now come into New Jerusalem in chapter 21, though “nothing unclean will enter it” (v 17). In the new world emerging, God indeed is “making all things new.” God is healing the nations, redeeming even the kings of the earth. The world envisioned by John is a world transformed, made new by the Living Word of God.



Laying the first brick in a project to rebuild a destroyed section of the hospital in Bolenge, built by Disciples in Congo in 1928. An electrical fire in 2006 destroyed the newer building of the hospital and all its equipment. The hospital typically serves more than 16,000 people a year, almost half of them HIV/AIDS patients. It also provides early childhood vaccinations, prenatal care, and obstetrics, as well as treating various injuries and illnesses. Pediatrics and maternity wards have been completed and equipped, and work has begun on a surgical ward.

This is not “cheap grace,” however. Crossing the threshold of New Jerusalem brings transformation. The imperial *status quo ante* is gone. The immediate, intimate presence of God is *critical* presence, in the full meaning of the term -- as in its Greek root *krisis*, “decision.” A crisis is a “turning point” that calls for a decision. Turning points are dangerous, but they open new possibilities. They require decisive action. The unmediated presence of God in this vision brings us to a critical point that calls for decisive action. Whom will we serve? With whom will we pitch our tent, cast our lot? God or empire?



As in John’s day, it’s hard to imagine a world free from economic injustice, ecological devastation, and war. But John’s vision reminds us that the Risen Christ is in our midst. God is at work even now transforming the world, making all things new. The ancient prophet calls us to open eyes of faith and see the world-transforming presence of God.

Construction of the third building at the Bolenge hospital as of May 2013. Picture from Global Ministries website
<http://globalministries.org/africa/projects/bolenge-hospital.html>

The courageous and committed Christian women and men who left North America to set up camp in Congo in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did so because they believed that God loves the people of Congo just as much as God loves the people of North America and Europe. Most felt that God is as present there as God is present here. These “missionaries” understood themselves as witnesses to the presence of God among the peoples of Africa, to affirm Africans’ fundamental dignity and worth. As with all human endeavors, the “Congo mission” was a mixed bag. Deep and humble love often was intertwined with feelings of cultural superiority. The mission sometimes went hand-in-hand with the imperial economic interests of Europeans and North Americans. But in important ways, the critical power of the gospel worked against those interests, at times shining a bright light on the abuses of colonial power and the devastations of international economic exploitation and openly resisting them.

Today, a thriving Disciples community in Congo stands as a witness to the presence of the Risen Christ, the world-transforming power of God. The Congolese church is a sign of life and hope in the face of devastations caused by war and economic exploitation. Through educational programs and health care, through support for survivors of sexual violence and rape as an instrument of war, through promotion of human rights and strategic investments in small-scale, sustainable economic development, the church in Congo embodies and offers witness to the critical presence of the Risen Christ, the transforming power of God who is, even now, making all things new. Through our partnership and critical presence with one another, we too stand as witnesses to the world-transforming presence of God, even in difficult circumstances, even in turbulent times, even against the powerful forces of war and greed.

Close with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing

*O Immanuel,
God with us,
God among us,
eternal light,
give us the strength
and the clarity of vision
to walk through the gates of New Jerusalem
and be healed.
Give us the courage
to free ourselves
from the grip of bondage,
from the tempting allure
of great wealth and power,
to live lives of justice
and presence with brothers and sisters
on the margins of empire's reach.
Bless your church in Congo.
Bless your church in the US and Canada.
Increase our love for one another.
Help us stand together.
And help us see the truth:
that you have pitched your tent with us,
that you stand in our midst,
that you hold in your hand
the spiritual power we need
for challenging times such as these.
Hold us in your loving embrace,
lead us as we walk together
through the gates of New Jerusalem,
that our world may be healed.
In the name of the Alpha and the Omega,
the first and the last,
the One Who Lives
forever and ever,
Amen*