

“A Passion for the Possible”

Revelation 21.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, May 16, 2004

Over the last two weeks, we have had horrendous images seared into our minds: the images of Iraqi captives being humiliated and degraded by American soldiers, and the images of the barbaric decapitation of Nicholas Berg at the hands of Al Qaeda. We can’t ignore these atrocities: we need to go through them to get beyond them.

These images have caused me to wonder where God is, and why God doesn’t seem to be doing anything about such atrocities. The words of the Psalmist still ring true across the ages:

To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, do not refuse to hear me,
for if you are silent to me,
I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
Hear the voice of my supplication,
as I cry to you for help.¹

Like the Psalmist, we can ask for God’s help, and yet we can’t set up “vending machine theology,” in which prayer goes in the slot, we pull the lever, and God delivers whatever we’ve requested. God doesn’t work that way. In my experience, prayer alone doesn’t usually result in action.

Madeleine L’Engle, the renowned author and Christian thinker, was interviewed in *Newsweek* recently and she quipped, “Sometimes, I think God is a s--t – and he wouldn’t be worth it otherwise.” The interviewer then asked, “So, to you, faith is not a comfort?” “Good heavens, no. It’s a challenge. I *dare* you to believe in God.”²

If we are going to move through and beyond our current state of affairs, we must have hope. I’m not talking about the Pollyanna variety of hope, or hope that *blocks out* reality. Rather, what I refer to is an **engaged** hope that relies on **faith**, on **prayer** and on **action**. It’s the kind of hope the Amistad Committee had, the kind of hope the Freedom Riders of the 1960s had, and it’s the kind of hope we need.

One of the modern church’s great writer of aphorisms is William Sloane Coffin, who once wrote that “Hope arouses, as nothing else can, a passion for the possible.” I love that phrase – a passion for the possible – because it describes an active, engaged hope and its effect.



The end of the first century, when the Revelation of John was written, was a terrible time to be a Christian. There were only a few thousand Christians in the world. The Jerusalem Church had been scattered in 70 AD with the destruction of the Second Temple. Officially sanctioned persecution of Christians had begun in Rome. Nero blamed the burning of the city on its Christian inhabitants. Persecution was becoming the order of the day for the early church.

And it made Christians wonder where God was in the midst of it all. One answer can be found in the Revelation (or Apocalypse) of John. Their answer – which provided hope of triumph over Rome – was through apocalyptic eschatology or the idea that the end of the world was near, and that something new and better would take its place: a

¹ Ps. 28.1–2

² *Newsweek*, May 17, 2004, p. 4.

new Jerusalem, which would be the culmination of the kingdom of God that Jesus had announced.

Well, it's been 1,900 years, and we're still waiting for the apocalypse. But, there is another way to read Revelation: as a deep hope, as a testament to the possibility of God and humankind active in the world together. As this morning's text recalls, "The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God."

God is with us! And it is God's presence that drives us and our passion for the possible. Whether it's the presence of Al Qaeda in our airports or the sadistic persons who conduct torture and humiliation in our name, there is a force of power and light and love that is greater than any of us. It is a power that transforms deepest night into daylight, hatred into lovingkindness, strangers into friends, otherness into brother and sisterhood, and fear into love. "I am making all things new."



In my experience, God does not act alone, but through the willing participation of humankind: luring us toward wholeness and toward God's intention. If God acted alone, we'd be no more than marionettes at the end of a long, cosmic string. But our free will means that we are given a choice about whether we will become "like those who go down into the Pit."

Hope is not passive. Hope requires our will, our effort, our deep engagement.

I was talking with one of our members last week who was feeling quite hopeless about our national and global situation. And I realized that I'm not hopeless – at least not yet: I think that we, together with God's help, have the power to effect positive change in our life together as a community of faith, as a nation, and as God's world.

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the Nation Council of Churches, recently posed this question: "If the church had a foreign policy, what would it look like? Could there be a more important moment to ask that question than now?"³ We need to keep before us the question: is this the kind of world God envisions for us? What *would* Jesus do? We may not be able to say with absolute certainty, but we have enough clues from the life and teachings of Jesus that we can find our way. We can ask the question: "Is it in **my** best interest?" Or we can ask the question: "Is it in **our** best interest?" "Is it in **our** national interest?" or "Is it in **all nations'** interest?"

We can no longer afford to let greed, war-mongering, and domination be the hallmark of American foreign policy. If you read the Bible carefully, you'll see that these traits are not in line with God's intention for humanity. **Shalom** doesn't translate as "war." **Grace** doesn't involve greed. "Dikaios" doesn't mean "domination," it means **justice**. And until we in our nation get that message, we will keep having our hopes of a new Jerusalem dashed. We must use the building blocks that the Hebrew prophets and Jesus give us: peace, justice, and grace.

How do we expect to see a new Jerusalem if we aren't willing to hope for it and participate with God in working toward it? It's not easy, and it's often uncomfortable, but God didn't promise us comfort, but rather *relationship*. We need to cultivate hope and a passion for the possible.



I'd like to talk just for a moment about assertions that I make from this pulpit: whether social, political, or theological. I appreciate the privilege of sharing my views with you, and I think they are valid perspectives, but not the *only* perspectives. You need not

³ in *The Christian Century*, May 18, 2004, p. 7.

agree with me, but I do appreciate that perhaps I might challenge you to think of things in a slightly new and different way.

It's especially important for me to clarify this at a time when the Roman Catholic bishop of Colorado Springs has ordered priests in his diocese to refuse communion to anyone who dares to vote for a candidate who supports a woman's right to choose an abortion, stem-cell research, gay marriage, or euthanasia. Congregationalists do not all think the same way, nor have they ever. *And the same is true for Roman Catholics.* I would ask that we keep our sisters and brothers in that denomination in our prayers, that their leaders might extend to them the liberty to use their own consciences and sense of what is right: the same privilege we have enjoyed in the UCC since its inception.



It's not an easy time we live in, especially if we are young men in Palestine, poor children in the streets of Calcutta, or anyone in Iraq. We aren't the first generation of people to have faced adversity, nor are we the first to find hope challenging. (And that's hopeful, in itself!) When the industrial revolution was just getting a toe-hold in England, a horrified and hopeful poet, William Blake, wrote the wonderful words that were inspired by this section of Revelation: "And was Jerusalem builded here, among these dark Satanic mills." What are *our* dark, Satanic mills? And how does the hope of this risen Christ walking in our midst inform our sense of hope and purpose? "I will not cease from mental fight...till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." Blake is working here *not* with a detached sense of unrealistic hope. Let us do likewise, and commit ourselves to an engaged hope that engenders a passion for the possible. Amen.