

May 18, 2025
Revelation 21:1-6

Easter 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Home of God Is with Us”

“See, the home of God is among mortals ... he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

Among my most prized possessions is my home communion kit, the black box I carry with me when I visit a parishioner to share the Lord's Supper. It does not have any objective monetary value; I probably would not even get a nickel for it if I took it to the *Antiques Roadshow*. It is valuable to me because it was an ordination gift from my home congregation, where I was loved and nurtured in the Christian faith and where I first experienced my call to ordained ministry. My home congregation supported me through all my years of education and formation, and it was at my home congregation that I was ordained on June 15, 1983. At the reception following the service, I was presented with this precious gift, and while I could have replaced it with a newer communion kit years ago it still holds such precious memories for me that I will continue to use it until the communion kit (or the one who bears it) falls apart!

This communion kit has become such a regular part of my life as a pastor that I sometimes forget that people have no idea what it is when I bring it into someone's home or into a care facility for the first time. This happened recently when I was visiting one of our members in a local long-term care residence. As I was walking down the hallway to the person's room, one of the health care workers asked me what was in the black box. I stopped and opened it to show her the miniature versions of the chalice, paten, and cruet inside; she was quite impressed, and commented that instead of someone coming to church, that day church was coming to them. I thanked her and moved on to my visit; but those words stuck with me. Indeed, we often think of “church” as the place where we gather for worship, to hear the Word of God and share in the Holy Sacraments. While “church” need not be a building such as the one in which our congregation gathers (the word “church” means “assembly,” and it defines the gathering of God's people no matter where that location may be), we often travel to the gathering place where we meet as the people of God. But at times when God's people are unable to gather, the “church” comes to them in the form of people who go out to bring the Word of God and Holy Supper to those unable to make such a journey. In many congregations, parishioners set apart as “eucharistic ministers” bring the Sacrament to persons who are homebound or residents of care facilities. Each month, I lead worship in several local residences,

bringing the experience of gathering for worship to people who often cannot travel outside of these facilities. The communion kit that I treasure functions in the role for which it was intended: to bring God's blessings into the places where God's people dwell, knowing that "*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*" (Matthew 18:20).

As we continue to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in this Easter season, our Second Lesson takes us to the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament and one of the most controversial and misunderstood books of Holy Scripture. It is a book that has been widely misinterpreted over the years; it is the source of speculation about the "end times" and the second coming of Christ, and has been the justification for many false claims about what will happen when our Lord comes again "*in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end*" (Nicene Creed). Martin Luther had such a low opinion of Revelation that he believed that it should be removed from the New Testament:

- "My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it – Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle above all else is bound to do, as He says in Acts 1: 'Ye shall be my witnesses.' Therefore, I stick to the books which give me Christ clearly and purely." – *Preface to the New Testament*.

Despite Luther's opinion, Lutherans and other Christians continue to include Revelation in the canon of Holy Scripture, treasuring it as a message of hope to people experiencing persecution and oppression because of their witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Revelation is written in a style known as *apocalyptic*, a genre that functions as do modern codes in getting messages to one's allies without these messages being intercepted by one's enemies. Apocalyptic arises in the Bible in such times of distress, offering a message of faith and hope that cannot be written in plain text due to the circumstances of both the author and reader. The book was composed and sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) at some point between AD 69-96 in order to encourage them with the assurance that, "*despite all the forces marshalled against them, victory was theirs if they remained loyal to Christ*" (Bruce Metzger). Through symbols that may appear bizarre to us but were understood by these recipients, the book of Revelation delivers a message of hope to both its original recipients and to people in every generation who hears its message not as a secret code that points to some cataclysmic event in history but as the message of God's steadfast love and eternal presence, the promise that "*thought he wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet*" (ELW Hymn 824).

- “The function of the revelation and the prophecy is that of ‘witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus’ (Rev. 1:2), which will reveal and proclaim to us now the meaning of this world and of our place within it. In the setting of Christian worship, we listen for the revealing and proclaiming word of him who is Alpha and Omega, who is and who was and who is to come. That word is not hidden but heard. So we shall approach the Book of Revelation as listeners, as hearers with faith. To use one of John’s favourite refrains, ‘he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”
– Richard Jeske.

The Book of Revelation (always in the singular) was revealed to John of Patmos as a vision that he is to share with the seven churches of Asia Minor and is a vision that he is instructed to write down for future generations, for *“these words are trustworthy and true”* (21:5). This instruction is included in today’s second lesson from a vision toward the end of the book sees a vision of *“a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more”* (21:1). The focus of the revelation is not on earth, not heaven, for it is to earth that the heavenly city will descend. God’s presence, until now hidden behind the vault of heaven, now tabernacles with those who dwell in the new Jerusalem. The throne of God is in the midst of the city, and the healing, sustenance, and relief only glimpsed previously is now revealed in its fullness:

- “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 centre 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.” – 7:15-17.

Picking up on a theme twice repeated in the final chapters of Isaiah (*“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”* – Isaiah 65:17), John of Patmos sees a new heaven and a new earth replacing the ones that have vanished. The theme of newness, hinted at in the promises to the angels of the seven churches (*“I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.”* – 3:17), is now fulfilled. What is past, the “first” – the provisional rather than the fundamental – is now more. The sea that has previously been an object of judgment (*“The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.”* – 16:3) is no longer a threat to God’s people.

- “It is the brightness and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth that he is despised and rejected, but he will come again and will appear in glory. He will bring a brightness so wonderful that all creatures will be made more beautiful than they are now. The light of the sun will be seven times brighter than it is now; the light of the moon will be like the present light of the sun. Trees, leaves, grass, fruit, and all things will be seven times as lovely as they are now.” – Martin Luther, 1531.

Into this place of newness comes the new Jerusalem, “*coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (21:2). This centerpiece of a world created anew by God is a “holy city,” set apart for God’s use in the world. What is distinctive about this vision is that this new city is not a remote oasis beyond the clouds, but it comes down from heaven to the world of human beings, for it is among human beings that God wishes to dwell. The new Jerusalem is the manifestation of the one who is prophesied as “God with us” as promised in the Old Testament:

- “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” – Leviticus 26:12.
- “Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child, and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” – Isaiah 7:14.

The new Jerusalem “*stands in contrast to its old counterparts and adversaries and therefore offers a living alternative to John’s readers.*” (Jeske). Jerusalem is likened to a “*bride adorned for her husband,*” an image that recalls the poetry of the Song of Solomon:

- “My beloved speaks and says to me, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’” – Song of Solomon 2:10-13.

This vision of a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth is accompanied by a voice from the throne that proclaims that “*the home of God is among mortals*” (21:3). God’s dwelling with the people characterizes the life of the holy nation in Hebrew Scriptures and fulfills Ezekiel’s vision of a new Jerusalem:

- “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never be put to shame.” – Joel 2:27.
- “The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD is There.” – Ezekiel 48:35.

In the New Testament, God’s dwelling (tabernacle) is the life of the holy, and so separate, people of God (*“For we are the temple of the living God, as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’”* – 2 Corinthians 6:16). Three times God is said to be “with them” (*meta*); *“this repetition stresses that we cannot flee from God. Our lives are too intertwined”* (Anna Bowden). In the new Jerusalem, mortals are now God’s peoples:

- “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” – 3:20-21.

In the holy city that comes into the midst of God’s people, God’s presence will be so close and intimate that it is God who will *“wipe every tear from their eyes”* (21:4). It is an image of loving care and intimacy that is found in both Isaiah and earlier in John’s vision (*“Then God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.”* – Isaiah 25:8). It reinforces the intimacy of God’s presence among God’s people; this God is not a distant God who watches us from a distance, nor is it a God who delegates the wiping of tears to an angel or heavenly being. God is the one who wipes away all tears; God is the one who offers care.

- “God does more than simply rescue God’s people. God joins God’s people in their pain and suffering and expresses sympathy and concern for them. Just as they see God, God sees them.” – Bowden.

This image of a compassionate and tender God recalls the account of Jesus weeping with Mary and her neighbours as they mourn the death of Lazarus (*“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved ... [and] Jesus began to weep”* (John 11:33-35). The God who weeps with us and wipes away the tears from our eyes is an image that proclaims that *“in a world that favours power and rhetoric over genuine empathy, a God who joins us in our tears is a powerful image of resurrection.”* (Bowden).

As God wipes away the tears from all who are in his presence, God's people are also assured that *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away"* (21:4). As Christ has risen from the dead so that the power of death is no longer the final word for those who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, God's people have the assurance that while our earthly life will one day come to an end, the eternal relationship that God establishes with us is one that not even death can take away from those who are in Christ:

- "No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:38-39.
- "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." – 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

The one who has brought the new Jerusalem down into the midst of God's people now proclaims that *"I am making all things new"* (21:5), a newness that fulfills the word proclaimed by Isaiah that the former things, the old ways, have disappeared as in the new Jerusalem God's home will now be with God's people:

- "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert ... to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they may declare my praise." – Isaiah 43:18-19.

John of Patmos, who has been witness to these visions, is now commanded to *"write this, for these words are trustworthy and true,"* for they are the Word of God that is for all people *"a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path"* (Psalm 119:105). Continue to address John personally, the one on the throne announces that *"it is done!"* in remembrance of Jesus' word of accomplishment on the cross that *"it is finished"* (John 19:30). God is both *"Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end"* (21:6). The gift of water as *"a gift from the spring of the water of life"* fulfills the promise of *"living waters [that] shall flow out from Jerusalem"* (Zechariah 14:8) and the invitation of Jesus to *"let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one*

who believes in me drink” (John 7:37). As God promises to be with God’s people and to make God’s home among God’s people, God promises that “those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God, and they will be my children” (21:7).

- “John reminds us that we are not heaven bound. Heaven is bound for us. God has come to dwell among God’s people, even in our moments of pain and suffering ... God meets us right here on earth. God is not waiting for us to join God in heaven. God is waiting for us to join God in the good work right here on earth.” – Bowden.

I cherish my home communion kit for the memories it evokes of the people of my home congregation who loved and nurtured me in the path that led me to ordained ministry; I also cherish it for the privilege it affords me of bringing the holy sacrament to God’s people wherever they may be; as the health worker put it best, I am bringing God to them. The good news of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ God is with us, and the day will come when God will come into our presence, wipe the tears from our eyes, and promise us that God will abide with us always in this new Jerusalem, our happy home where we will dwell with our Lord forever.

Amen.