

“Making Hope Visible”

Revelation 21:1-6

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When you were going through a tough time, whose words encouraged you? Whose presence lifted your spirits? Who is struggling and needs your help now?

These questions flowed out of our text as I studied it last week. It is a passage dripping with hope that has comforted many people when they needed it most. I read it frequently at funerals or committal services in cemeteries and have found it to be a source of strength and courage.

I am confident these words helped John's readers, too, during one of the most difficult times in their lives. Before I talk about that, let me share a few words about the book of Revelation.

The last book of the New Testament was written near the end of the first century by a man named John, who had been banished to the Isle of Patmos. We know little about the author and most scholars agree that he was not the same person that wrote the gospel or the three Johannine epistles. He identified himself merely as a brother, a servant and a witness of Jesus Christ. It appears, however, that he was well known to the Christians of Asia.

He wrote letters to seven churches in Asia Minor, encouraging them to be faithful to Christ in the midst of danger. Apparently the Roman Emperor, Domitian, required that his subjects worship Roman gods, of whom he was one, and those who refused did so at great peril.

John knew of the death of Antipas, a faithful disciple in Pergamum, and the fear this caused among all the followers of Jesus. So, he wrote these words to encourage them to remain faithful to Jesus in spite of the threats they faced. They are words of comfort and hope.

How did this passage comfort John's readers? It assured them of God's presence in their midst, walking every step along their difficult journey. Not for one moment or a single step were they alone. Always and at all times, God was with them.

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes’ ” Revelation 21:3-4a.

This is a beautiful image of God as a loving and engaged parent. By no means was he remote or distant. He was near and accessible, eager to offer encouragement and comfort.

“One day God will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” someone wrote, “but until that day, He cries with us.” I sense this kind of concern and compassion when I read this passage, which is similar to two passages familiar to John's readers.

John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Matthew 1:23, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God with us.’ ”

I understand how these texts could have comforted John's readers as they faced uncertain days.

These words also had to give them hope. They are filled with images of a better life beyond their present circumstances. John assured them that Domitian would not have the final word in their lives. God would, and it would be good.

Four times the word, new, is used in our text. “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. The one who sat on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ ” Revelation 21:1-2, 5a.

The world they knew that was filled with pain, sorrow, tears and death would give way to a world where these no longer existed. This was the promise of God on which their faith was grounded, dating all the way back to Isaiah's writings. The theme of a new heaven and earth was deep in Jewish thought.

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create

Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more” Isaiah 65:17-18.

I am confident the reminder of Isaiah’s dreams for a better life comforted and helped John’s readers. I would like to think they inspired and encouraged them to be faithful disciples in the toughest of times.

Are these words meant for you today? Are you going through a difficult time and find comfort and hope in them? Do you need to be reminded of God’s loving presence and open your heart to Him? Do you need to include Him on your journey in these uncertain times? I certainly hope you will.

As grateful as I am for these words of comfort and hope, I am equally thankful for what they teach me about helping others who are struggling. **In my opinion, this passage provides the finest model for helping someone who is struggling.**

Often, we wonder what we can do for someone who is struggling. This text tells us, or better yet, shows us. We can offer words of hope and accompany them on their journey, even through the valley of the shadow of death.

Like John, Isaiah and many other biblical writers, we can cast a vision of better days for someone who finds each day a struggle. We can remind them that new life is usually born out of pain and that their struggle will not have the final word in their life, either. With God, there is always more than pain and suffering because He continually works on our behalf to bring good out of bad.

Whose words redirected your thoughts and did this for you when you needed to hear them most? What difference did they make in your life? How did they help you with your struggles?

What difference can your words make in someone’s life this week? What could you say that would lighten their load and help them carry their burden? Ask God to help you speak to them.

Who needs you to dwell with them and wipe the tears from their eyes? Who needs you to be the presence of God this week?

In Bill Smith’s recently published book, Later: A Journey of Hope for When Everyone Survives, he writes about a young boy by the name of Johnny. He returned home late from school one day and his mother asked why. Johnny said, “Billy’s bike had broken and I stopped to help.” “Johnny,” his mom said, “you don’t know how to fix bikes.” Johnny replied, “I know, mom. I didn’t stop to fix the bike. I stopped to help Billy cry.”

Whose presence sustained you when your life was broken? Who cried with you to let you know you were not alone? You will never forget them, will you? Be that person this week for someone who needs you.

May I encourage you to do something else? **Would you go from this place and help build the kind of world this passage describes and Jesus longed for when he prayed, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”?** Would you do your part this week to create a new home, a new classroom, a new work environment, a new neighborhood, a new country and even a new world based upon the one John described in his vision?

Why do we have tears, pain, sorrow, separation and even death in this world? To a great degree, we are responsible because of the way we treat one another.

What if we changed the way we relate to one another? What if we treated each other the way Jesus treated his neighbors? What if we lived our lives the way he did? What if we arranged our values and priorities the way he did? Wouldn’t it make the world better and eliminate a lot of pain and suffering?

Why do we have to wait until we die to experience the kind of world John envisioned? I don’t think we do. This kind of hope begins in one heart. Why not let it be yours?

