

A NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

APRIL 28, 2013

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

MARIANNA, FLORIDA

TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

REVELATION 21:1-6

Our text this morning is the vision of John the Revelator of a restored creation, of a new heaven and a new earth. Everything has been transformed. Earth and heaven as we know it were gone, and in what is a puzzling image for many, there was no more sea.

Now if one can understand the symbolism of John, there is an explanation. John is envisioning a world without persecution. The Book of Revelation was written at a time of tremendous persecution of the Christian church. Nero had launched the first wave of persecution by the Romans, and now the Emperor Domitian has increased the scope of the attacks, particularly upon the churches in Asia Minor.

When John writes about the beast from the sea, he is writing about the Roman Empire, and when he says that there is no more sea, he is saying that not only will the persecutor be eliminated, but the source from which it came.

If you remember your world history, what you may have studied in West Civilization your freshman year in college, you will recall that the Roman Empire was overrun by the Germanic hordes, who in turn converted to Christianity and established what was known as the Holy Roman Empire. The leaders of Germany well into the twentieth century were known as the Kaiser, which is the German form of the word we know in English as Caesar.

Now most historians would tell us that the Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy nor Roman, but it did in fact eliminate the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, and did in fact eliminate the Roman Empire as it was known. In a real sense, the prophecy that the kingdom of this world would become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ was fulfilled by those barbarians who sacked the city of Rome and took the name of the Empire and its leader as their own, and then became Christians.

We live in a day and age today when some see the church under attack. Some even see Christians being persecuted. There are parts of the world today where it is a crime, punishable by death, to convert to Christianity. There are parts of the world today where it is a crime to preach the gospel, to teach from the Bible, to share one's Christian faith.

There are some who see a limiting of the influence of Christianity in our country, who point to the Supreme Court's long-standing ban on prayer in public schools, to recent controversies over the presence of the Ten Commandments in Court houses, and some even would call that persecution.

They say that only because they don't know what real persecution is. They don't know what it means to be beaten, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, killed, for being a Christian. We in this country have never suffered like that, and I pray we never will.

There were some who thought when this country was founded that it would be the new heaven and the new earth, literally the kingdom of God on earth. But it wasn't, and it isn't, and it won't ever be.

There are some who insist on calling this nation a Christian nation.

It isn't. It wasn't ever. I don't think it ever will be.

I have long resisted the use of the word Christian as an adjective. Like a Christian bookstore. Or Christian rock music. Or a Christian café'.

Christians are people who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. There can be a bookstore for Christians, or rock music played by Christians, or a café where Christians gather. I suppose there could be a nation of Christians, if ever there were a country on the face of the earth where everyone was a Christian.

I am grateful to have lived in a county where the schools are open for speakers who are Christians, where ministers of the gospel are welcomed on school campuses, where members of the school board open and close their meetings with prayer.

I am grateful that the young people in our schools can have organized prayer groups in the schools, can meet and pray every day if they so desire.

You really can't outlaw prayer in the public schools you know. You can outlaw public prayer, but as long as tests are given, and lunch is served, there will be prayer. One goes, "Lord, I promise if you let me pass this test, I'll study hard for the next one." Another goes, "O Lord, not meatloaf again!" Then there's one that goes, "Thank God, I didn't get caught!"

The image that John uses for the kingdom of heaven is the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, made beautiful and pure.

You know, for more than thirty years, I did around ten weddings a year. This has been a slow year. Here it is almost May, and I've only done one, and just got one more on the schedule. But you know, in more than 400 weddings, I've never seen an ugly bride. Brides are always beautiful. If there is one day in each woman's life that she looks her best, the best she will ever appear in public, it is the day of her wedding.

When John describes the holy city as being prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, he says a whole mouthful, doesn't he? The hair, the flowers, the dress, the shoes, the makeup, the nails, everything takes hours, days, weeks, to prepare and plan.

Heaven doesn't just happen. It takes preparation and planning. We live our lives preparing for heaven and planning to go there. Some of us make good preparations. Some of us have a solid plan. But as with every aspect of life, some folks are unprepared, some folks have made no plans at all.

There was a movie several years ago entitled *The Wedding Planner*. In some of the larger cities there are paid wedding planners. They are also known as bridal consultants. The first time I heard that phrase, I thought it was somebody who helped fit headgear on horses!

In a real sense, part of my job as a pastor is to be helping you prepare and plan for the kingdom of heaven.

Hear the good news! You don't have to buy a wedding dress, or even a bride's maid's dress. You don't have to rent a tuxedo. You won't have to buy a gift. You've already been given one. All you have to do is RSVP. Those letters mean, if I remember my French from college, *repondez vous, sil vous plait*. Please respond.

You've been invited to believe in the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. He was in the beginning with God, and He will be at the end with God, and even now He is Lord.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, the scripture tells us. And when you believe, your place at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb of God, when the Bride of Christ is united with Him, is assured.

The new heaven and the new earth are yours, and in that day the promise will be fulfilled that the tears will be wiped from all eyes, and there will be no more death and no more pain.

When someone dies, we often say that person passed away. Well, the way that John uses that phrase, it is the former things, the old heaven, the old earth, even the sea that will pass away. Those who are the redeemed of the Lord will live for ever, in the new heaven and the new earth. We do not pass away, everything else does. We will see a new heaven, and a new earth, and we will in fact, as part of the church, be the Bride of Christ, united with the Bridegroom, who is surely coming to claim us as His own.

Hallelujah, Amen!

