

The Missing Peace
Revelation 21:1-6
Isaiah 65:17-25
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A few weeks ago I was examined for ordination on the floor of a presbytery meeting. For anyone who hasn't witnessed or endured one of these examinations, it's something of a cross between a criminal trial and a dissertation defense. You are asked to write your statement of faith in a single spaced one page paper and read it to a group of three hundred over-caffeinated Presbyterian ministers and elders. The members of presbytery are then allowed to come forward to microphones and ask you any question about your theology, motivation for ministry, personal background, or political views. Sounds fun doesn't it? Well it's frightening to say the least especially because this group of people is supposed to decide whether you are fit to be ordained in this church of ours. The reason I tell you this story is not to try to discourage anyone thinking of entering the ordination process but rather because one of the questions posed to me that day really got me thinking.

A minister came forward and asked probably the most difficult question of the day. “Camille, I’d like to ask you something about the last sentence in your statement of faith...you said the church prays for the day when Christ will return and usher in a new heaven and a new earth? What does it mean to look for a new heaven and a new earth? And do Presbyterians really believe that?”

Now if I had been biblically astute I would have quoted the two passages just read for us, one from the prophet Isaiah and one from John the writer of the book of Revelation. Two similar passages from the Old and New Testaments both writing about future days of bliss and future promises of peace, promises of a new heaven and a new earth. But even after quoting scriptures that reference the new heaven and the new earth the question remains...what do we mean a new heaven and a new earth and do we as Presbyterians really believe that sort of thing?

One commentator suggests that the passage from the prophet Isaiah is perfect “evidence for a Marxist analysis of religion as an opiate of the people.”¹ An opiate of the people, this is a famous quote from Karl Marx the German socialist thinker. This quote exemplifies his belief that religion does nothing more than create fantasies in the mind of the poor. Marx says that religion leads people to believe that it is ok if your reality isn't so great right now because there will be a new earth, a better earth to come. It prevents people from uprising, keeps them complacent, keeps them looking to the skies. It keeps the poor poor and the rich rich. But is that really what this is to us, is that really what it comes down to...an opiate for the people? A drug to dull our senses, to numb the present pain of our realities? Do these poetic words from Isaiah and these hopeful words from John simply pacify us? Peace, peace but there is no peace.

¹ Interpretation pg. 245.

When we think about new heaven and a new earth, we think about a world without war, without famine, without inequality, we think about a world at peace. Historian Will Durant estimated that in all of human history only twenty-nine years can be described as free of war. And of all centuries, the one just past set records for bloodletting.² What does peace even look like to a world like that? We are a people shaped by our wars; we learn our history, our geography, our nationality by our wars. Our children grow up thinking war is the norm and peace is an anomaly. War has become the condition rather than the exception. Plato pointedly said, “Only the dead have seen an end to war.”³ Only the dead have seen an end to war.

² *Credo*. William Sloane Coffin. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2004. pg 91.

³ *Credo*. William Sloane Coffin. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2004. pg 91.

So we will have to admit that the words we find here in Isaiah and Revelation do offer hope to us for a different kind of existence, an existence that looks wholly different from the realities we see on the news, read in the papers, and experience in our own lives. Certainly the new heaven and the new earth won't include terrorists on planes, nuclear bombs, missing children, unemployment, corporate scandals. Revelation says that, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." Isaiah says, "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress, no more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime." But Karl Marx would say these are just futuristic promises that do more to hinder us than empower us? So do we, the famously logical and rational Presbyterians, believe in this stuff? Do we believe in a new heaven and a new earth, a different possibility to our own realities? Or is this simply fairytale daydreaming for the unexamined life?

If we turn to the bible for insight, clarity is lost in translation, literally. Between the Hebrew writings in the English translation we lose something of tense and intentionality of this creation of the new heaven and the new earth. The Hebrew word is bara and its basic meaning is to create. It is the same word used in Genesis 1:1, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Bara: To create, to shape, to form. But the tense of the verb is not one of past action or future expectation as we have commonly translated it, saying God created or God will create. Rather the tense is one of a definitive beginning with an unnoted ending. Bara could more appropriately be translated began creating.

So why the Hebrew lesson? Because it makes a distinction for us, because it makes a theological point, Isaiah and Revelation are revealing to us an image of a God that creates and a God that continually redeems that creation. A more appropriate translation would be, “I am creating a new heaven and a new earth.” It is an active verb not an action of the past or simply a distant hope for the future. It reveals a God that is always creating and re-creating, bringing new life out of death, bringing good out of evil. We do not believe in a God that set the world spinning on its axis and then lost interest in the creation. We are more than a week-long craft project for an aloof and absent God. We believe in a God that is active in the world and in our lives. A picture of this kind of God is hardly an opiate for the people, it is hardly a God that encourages apathy, complacency, or patient futuristic dreaming.

The writers of Isaiah and Revelation are both known for their criticisms of the powers to be and for their proclamation of the world's potential for change. Prof. Brian Blount, a Presbyterian himself, says that John's writing in Revelation is anything but an opiate to the people. Blount believes that John used this piece to speak prophetically to the Roman government. He says this, "John took their language, subverted it, and used it for his own resistant, oppositional cause... John wasn't hiding his claims from Rome. He wanted Rome to hear his songs and know that his people were singing in antiphonal response to them. He wanted Rome to know that God's future lordship was taking place in the present, that God's people had committed themselves to standing up for that lordship, and that God was now standing with them and against Rome. John the hymnist was John the rapper. He was not hiding from a fight; he was picking one."⁴ End Quote.

⁴ Blount, Brian. *Can I get a Witness?* Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2005. Pg. 110.

Picking a fight? Hardly pacifying poetry as Marx would suggest. Paul Hanson another biblical scholar similarly says Isaiah's writing is 'an act of defiant affirmation that no power will thwart the fulfillment of God's righteous purpose.' Isaiah's and John's prophetic and poetic readings do engender hope but hope, which inspires ingenuity, empowers change, and drives action.

With the daily news filled with stories of mounting casualties, fruitless peace-talks, rebel attacks, prisoners of war, demolished communities, It's difficult to refute the historian's claims that our world is at war. But the presence of war in the world and in our blood stained history books does not negate the potential and the necessity of peace. But as William Sloane Coffin says, "Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can't just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, demand it from our governments as if peace were God's most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is."⁵ Our fervent prayers for peace, for a new heaven and a new earth, should compel us to get off our knees and work to enable its existence. More is required of faithful people than sitting on their hands in prayer and hoping God will do the rest. We must admit that at times we are the missing piece; we do more to hinder God's creation than nourish it. We hold grudges, we chuckle at offensive jokes, we permit intolerance, we let stereotypes become truths, we take more than we need, we dismiss each others feelings, we antagonize, we gossip, we undermine. We in fact barricade peace from existence.

⁵ *Credo*. William Sloane Coffin. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2004. pg 93.

And yet Jesus has called us to be peace-makers, not peace dreamers or peace-thinkers but active and engaged peace-makers. We are called to seek out the estranged, to make right what is broken, to call an end to the fighting, to put down our weapons, to make compromises for the sake of peace in global affairs and personal affairs. Our lives should be the embodied prayers of our hearts. “One afternoon in December Dorothy Day walked uptown from St. Joseph’s House to Old St. Patrick’s, the antebellum cathedral on Mott Street. Inside it was cool and dark, the stained-glass windows like icicles. She settled in a pew in the back. She thought. She prayed. She said the Rosary. Then she took out paper and pen and wrote an editorial for the *Catholic Worker*. The title she gave it captured its message: OUR COUNTRY PASSES FROM UNDECLARED WAR; WE CONTINUE OUR CHRISTIAN PACIFIST STAND.”⁶ Dorothy Day gave us a wonderful example of an embodied prayer: she thought, she prayed, and then she acted.

⁶ Elie, Paul. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, NY: 2003. Pg. 131.

Our lives should be our own embodied prayers. And it is these embodied prayers which profess that our faith is not numbing our senses or diluting our realities but clearing our heads and sustaining our efforts. Every time we engage in acts of kindness, acts of social justice, acts of selfless service we proclaim we believe in the new heaven and the new earth. We proclaim that we believe in a God that is active and present continually creating and redeeming creation. And we proclaim that we believe we can do something about the missing peace around us.

So how would you answer the question, what do you mean a new heaven and a new earth? And do you really believe it?

In the traditional Roman Catholic Mass, the last words of the service were spoken by the deacon: “Ite, missa est,” which means “Go, you are dismissed” or, even more literally “Go, you are sent.”⁷ Go, you are sent not as peace-wishers or peace-dreamers but as peace-makers.

⁷ Long, Thomas. *Testimony – Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA. 2004. Pg. 65.