

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

MAKING THINGS NEW

Revelation 21:1 -6a November 1, 2009

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We all like “stories of origin” – stories that describe the circumstances from whence we have come. I have friends who spend countless hours on genealogy - looking up that recorded history of their descendants. As they chart the journeys of their ancestors, they learn of places they have called home. From our childhood, we have listened to fanciful tales of the origins of things. Remember Rudyard Kipling’s JUST SO STORIES. My favorite is “How The Leopard Got Its Spots.” Of course, we Christians (and Jews for that part) turn to the book of Genesis to read the story of our origin. Genesis tells how the world and everything therein came to be created by God. Of course we spend a lot of our time theologizing about whether these stories ought to be regarded as literal descriptions, or interpreted as figurative accounts expressing a moral purpose. Some people think Kipling’s tales and the stories of creation in Genesis are just overactive literary imagination. But really, however we try to resolve that issue, these stories tell us something about ourselves. They focus our attention on our roots and the ultimate sources of our lives. The Greek word for the stories of origin is etiologies – from the Greek word “Cause.” These etiologies have great power in helping us understand where we came from and why we are here.

These “Stories of Origin” have a logical counterpart: “stories of destination.” Destination stories tell us where we are going. There are not as many of these stories. We find it easier to look into the past than to look into the future. These “Stories of Destination” provide more than a sequence of future events that lead to a destination. They help us to answer the question “Where are you going” in a much broader sense. A good way to think of it is “Where are you headed?” “In what direction is your life taking you?” Etiologies speak of our beginning. These stories of our end are called “Eschatologies” – accounts of the end – not just of finality of life, but also in the sense of purpose of our life.

The book of Revelation tends to make us nervous. We never know what craziness someone may find in it. The book barely made it into the cannon of the New Testament. Some find the book disjointed, inconsistent, violent, and madly repetitive. There is a dragon with seven heads, women clothed in the sun, the Lamb upon his throne. In many ways, it is a confusing book. So why do we invoke Revelation on a feast day like All Saints?

I believe it is because at its heart, the book of Revelation is a book of consolation. It is a vision of comfort for a people persecuted and in great distress. These are the first saints of the church, risking all they had for the sake of a name – the name of Christ, which they knew was above the name of the emperor himself. What was at stake was control of their basic understanding of identity. Do we belong to the emperor, or do we belong to God. In baptism, they had been made citizens of a heavenly city, a city not made by human hands.

John, the writer of Revelation has been banished to the island of Patmos. He writes to the seven churches in Asia Minor under great persecution. He uses images and language long lost on us. But his message is one of encouragement and hope to these people in great distress.

Genesis talks of creation. Revelation speaks of the end. What is at the end? A new heaven and a new earth. There is the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. There is this loud voice, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them: they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them: he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more: mourning and crying and pain will be no more. See, I am making all things new."

Today, this passage in Revelation is asking us to view existence from the perspective of eternity. This transcendent vision of the holy city is appropriate reading for today. We honor the saints who have come before us, whose examples we wish to follow. This vision is also about the saints who are alive today. Those saints are among us who call us to see beyond ourselves. Those saints among us who are willing to give their very lives to a cause that include all of God's children. And this vision is also about the saints who will come after us. We understand that in our baptism, we become saints as well. We belong to this communion of saints, past, present, and future. It is this presence of God among us that binds us into one people

Where are we as a people headed? The book of Revelation says we are headed back to God. This is not true just for individuals. It is the destiny of the church, the nations, the entire created order. It should be no surprise to us that the description of the new city includes a garden, with the tree of life, endless fruit, and leaves that heal the nations.

So, on this All Saints Sunday, we gather to remember and honor and celebrate those who have gone before us. Their presence is among us. Remember their names. And in that remembering they come to bless our lives again on this day. Let us join them as The People of God.