

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 29, 2011
Lessons: Genesis 4:19-26; 5:1-2 and Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-2

HOPE FOR OUR HUMANITY

Visions in the Bible, such as the two in our lesson from Revelation, are never given to us for our information. They use images, symbols, and stereotypical forms to help us see and understand the hidden but needed truth of God's love and mercy. They seek to open our eyes when the stubbornness of our wills or the cruelty of our circumstances or just the dullness of our days has blinded us to whatever it is God wants us to see. People who misuse biblical visions as though they were documentaries distort the message, misleading themselves and others. To take the visions in Revelation literally as documentaries of the future is to mistake their nature and purpose. If you and I were having a disagreement and in frustration you were to tell me, "Dick, your mind is blocked," would you expect me to panic and run to a brain surgeon? If I were to return from a trip and tell you I had found paradise, would you think I had visited somewhere not on earth? We need to understand what the Bible is showing and telling us within the context of human experience, back then and now today, and what response it elicits from us.

The visions in the book of Revelation are given for humble people of faith in their darkest hours when hope seems gone beyond recall, when the tyrant who seeks to destroy them seems all-powerful, and when evil seems sure to win. Revelation is not for the mighty in charge; it is for the powerless about to perish. Revelation's portrayals of hope's vindication beyond all hope are not given to idle minds for silly speculations or self-serving claims to an insider's knowledge of the future. We are called to trust not speculate, to encourage hope not fear, and to be faithful even in the darkest hour not proud in pretense to a documentary type of knowledge God gives to no human being on this earth, not even Jesus. "But about that day or hour," Jesus says, "no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."¹ In short, stop worrying about it, stop speculating, stop even wanting such knowledge of the future, and start loving this world God loves and seeking the kind of humanity to which Jesus Christ calls us. All biblical visions of heaven are given to change minds, hearts, and relationships here on earth, and all visions of the future are designed to change what we will do with the present.

So, moving on to the real business at hand, what in the world was I thinking when I titled this sermon, "Hope for Our Humanity"? I am saying the resurrection of Jesus, the man crucified in utter disgrace and apparent despair, vindicates hope not only for the future of the

human race but for the very nature of humanity as such. God has given us unquenchable hope for becoming human as God created human to be.

When people talk about human nature, they tend to go to one extreme or the other. They tip belief too far toward either human goodness or human evil, celebration of our humanity or disdain for it, unwarranted optimism or sneering cynicism. So-called conservative Christianity believes that people are born bad and need to be beaten into submission and forced to obedience. Nineteenth Century Protestant Liberalism believed people were born good and just needed to be educated and cultivated into their goodness until the cruelty in human nature shrank to nothing. Such optimistic liberalism could not endure the atrocities of the Twentieth Century. Talk of the “milk of human kindness” must fall silent at the gates of Auschwitz. Our own Reformed and Presbyterian tradition certainly went too far the other way, speaking of human nature in terms of “total depravity.” Sure, the original idea was that no human being can possibly have any merit on which to stand before the judgment of God without need of redeeming love, but we pushed this total depravity idea so far that it became impossible to imagine how or why God would love us at all, and it blurred all distinctions between people who seek to make choices in favor of kindness or compassion and people who day after day seek clever ways to be successfully greedy, self-serving, deceitful, and cruel. Total depravity rendered our choices in daily life meaningless, and it empowered authoritarian Christians to be cold and cruel toward others over whom they exercised control, starting with their own families. It was as though God had empowered the father figure to be the father almighty so that whether in family, church, workplace, financial system, or the halls of political power, father knew best.

The Bible’s various pictures of human nature show us a much more complex blending of its persistent evils and the ever-reemerging goodness for which God created us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa titled the book he wrote with his youngest daughter, *Made for Goodness*.² Tutu is certainly Christian theologian enough to reject any suggestion that we stand before God on the strength of our own goodness. He urges us to stop the futility of trying to be good and seek instead to choose the goodness God sets before us in life. Jesus himself made continual choices for compassion over correctness and his own personal safety, but he squarely rejected being called good.³ He chose goodness daily without thinking of himself as being good. We choose goodness occasionally and often conveniently but then think of ourselves as being good. That is a big difference between Jesus and us, but Desmond Tutu calls upon us to narrow the gap. “Stop Being Good” he titles one of his chapters, but his appeal is for us to make a habit of choosing the good, the kind, the right to which God leads us.

Genesis presents a complex picture of human development by showing us progress in culture and engineering side by side with progress in cruelty and vengeful murder. We see

the birth of musical instruments and so of the potential for musical harmony right along with the birth of jealousy and its escalation into murderous discord propelled by shame into the endless cycles of vengeance we know only too well in our world.

Our choices matter, but that's not enough to say. Our choices matter because they shape our lives, making us choice by choice the people we are becoming. The too-liberal view denies the importance of our choices by making the cruel, selfish, and heartless ones seem trivial. The too-conservative view denies the importance of our choices by making the compassionate, kind, and fair ones seem trivial. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus gives undying hope that our good choices can bear fruit while our bad ones can be redeemed and will be redeemed because God has a future for us, not of shame or despair, but of life and love and joy.

Sometimes I find that I learn from words in languages I do not speak. I learn because those words open windows of understanding to give me new viewpoints on life. Let me share two of them with you that have been shared with me. The first foreign word is a long, difficult one in Greek: *eudaimonia*. Ugh, right? It gets translated as "happiness," but the philosopher Martha Nussbaum expands that insufficient translation.⁴ The word tells of thriving, of flourishing in the self and in life. It's what we want for ourselves and our children — to see the gifts God gave us grow and thrive and bear fruit, to see our kids become the wonderful people God gave them the potential to be. Forget the word itself (as I suspect you will); what matters is the hope, the very personalized hope God has for each of us and we have for our children that they will flourish, thrive, and prosper in ways not measured by anybody's numbers for wealth, prestige, or influence.

The second word modifies the first by making sure that our thriving is turned outward and shared in a life that is not all about me and my own prosperity of any kind, material or spiritual. The word is *ubuntu*, a South African word from some language that, Desmond Tutu teaches, "recognizes the interconnectedness of life." He writes: "My humanity, we say, is bound up with your humanity. One consequence of *ubuntu* is that we recognize that we all need to live our lives in ways that ensure that others may live well. Our flourishing should enhance the lives of others, not detract from them." He goes on, "God's invitation to wholeness always includes more than ourselves. God's invitation to wholeness is *ubuntu*."⁵

The visions in Revelation promise that God's creative and redemptive love will not be defeated ultimately by the powers of destruction. That Jesus Christ lives means there is hope for our humanity and that hope will not fail us, not even when we fail. But to become God's truth for us, the vision must begin to affect us now and here. The someday vision is a this-day call to choice, to change, to trust, to life — to the human nature and shared humanity for which God created us. Amen.

Notes:

1. Mark 13:32 (NRSV)
2. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.
3. Mark 10:17,18
4. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp 31-33 and throughout.
5. Tutu, pp. 47,48.