Sermon for The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, May 19, 2019

Text: Revelation 21:1-6
Title: Come down

I grew up going to public schools, but the kind of public schools that boasted their very own, fully functional, (then) state of the art planetarium right in the High School. This meant that, in addition to offering Into to Astronomy to students in 9th through 12th grades, every elementary and middle school class from Kindergarten up took a fieldtrip to the planetarium twice each year. In terms of excitement, it was like pizza day and the book fair rolled into one, but even better. I suppose this was partially because planetariums are, objectively speaking, awesome. I mean, you go into this huge, dark space, part movie theater / part science lab, and then get to explore the cosmos from your squishy, squeaky seat, watching stars be born and galaxies swirl, asteroids collide and supernovas explode. And our giddiness was also partially because days at the planetarium meant days with Mr. Zajac, teacher extraordinaire and intrepid guide to the mysteries of the universe, whose enthusiasm for fifty-five-minute interstellar exploration was unparalleled.

There was something magical, reverential, almost liturgical, in how he carefully choreographed our time in the planetarium, especially the beginnings. We started in the auditorium style seats facing a wall of chalkboards, where Mr. Zajac introduced the lesson – say, dark matter, or the formation of the Earth – and then he’d dim the lights just enough so we could safely move to the reclining chairs under the inverted dome behind us, taking seats in circular rows around a massive, stumpy cylinder in the center as the room got darker and darker, quieter and quieter. Mr. Zajac took his place in a booth along the back wall – command central – and just before losing us entirely to whispers and daydreams, the room would go black, and we’d hear the machinery in that stumpy cylinder hum to life. The theme song from 2001: A Space Odyssey – always 2001: A Space Odyssey – began to build all around us, beat and brass pouring in from the surround sound speakers as a massive projector emerged from the center of the circle, eerily human with its spherical head and angular, metallic limbs. Up, up it would go: reaching higher and higher, as stars began to appear around us, dimly at first and then with more insistence, mapping a familiar winter sky.
I loved that place. Even as an elementary student, I remember feeling deeply soothed pondering the bigness of space and my small, precious place in it. This seems to be a near-universal experience. People throughout history on every corner of the globe have been drawn in awe and wonder to ponder the stars, gazing out there, up there, far away, with a sense of eager anticipation, enjoying a front row seat every night to the miracle of creation. So it makes a kind of sense that we’ve tended to imagine God – whatever we mean by that – out there, up there, far away, somewhere off in the deep dark distance, and, similarly, to think heaven, God’s home – whatever we mean by that – is also somewhere out there, up there, far away. When we look up, we look heavenward. When the hail Mary pass connects, we glance or point toward the stars in thanks.

Christian art and literature throughout the ages has eagerly furthered this notion, providing us tremendous and troubling images of God in the clouds, saints in the stars, a faraway cosmos of communion. So it might surprise us to realize that the mystic vision which has most inspired the fear and fervor associated with ultimate endings and apocalypse – the Revelation to John, from which we heard earlier this morning - maps a rather different heavenly geography, one in which we do not ultimately ascend out there, up there, far away, but in which God descends, comes down, and dwells forever here, among us. “A new heaven and a new earth” is how John describes it, seeing the new Jerusalem – the city of God – coming down as a voice proclaims, “The home of God is among mortals… God will wipe 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." Heaven –perfect oneness, absolute union with God, ultimate homecoming – is not something we find out there. Instead, it begins and ends right here. So, if we are looking to God, aiming for heaven, we need not turn our gaze upward but inward and toward one another.

This heavenly promise seems much more resonate with what Jesus said all along about the Kingdom of God: that it is here, in our midst, breaking in. It is already and not yet: the province of the alpha and omega, who makes all things new. This might seem like a rather academic distinction, but the truth is our maps – our expectations - tend to shape what we are willing and able to see, the focus of our gaze as refining as it is limiting. Catholic theologian Fr. Ronald Rolheiser points this out in his illuminating book The Shattered Lantern, inviting readers to imagine ourselves in a crowded train station or airport looking for a beloved and long awaited friend. A stream of faces rush by, all unique and lovely in their way, each belonging to a beloved
child of God, but in our eagerness to greet our friend we barely notice them. Even were another friend or relative in the crowd, we would likely miss them due to our intensity of focus, our narrowness of gaze, our fixity of expectation.

So if we are busy looking out there, up there, far away, our attention fixed on a vertical axis for signs of heavenly hope, we might miss the signs of God’s in-breaking kingdom all around us, in the ordinary and disappointing and distressing moments of our days as they rush past, blurring into a familiar but potentially uninspired backdrop. And even worse – if we fix our hearts on the beyond and come up short in our searching, we might mistakenly assume that God is not only not out there, but nowhere to be found. Remembering that eternity does not involve going anywhere else (except perhaps deeper within) also inevitably shapes how we experience this Earth. This place. This time. Here. Now. Many popular expressions of Christianity today justify a total disregard for the earth, for our communities, for justice and mercy in this world because, eventually, the good among us – and those who propagate such systems of belief always include themselves in that - will escape out there, up there, far away, and go to heaven, as though there’s some other place where God is that we are not, as though God could care less about our real, complicated, creative lives lived out on this beautiful and broken corner of the cosmos, despite the central story of our faith being that of God’s tender incarnation among us. God’s desire to know us, love us, and walk with us in Jesus, bearing our burdens and anointing our wounds. This kind of thinking has even been so twisted as to justify violence and exploitation - the exact opposite of the way of Jesus – with the promise of an other-worldly paradise. I suppose people will go on believing what they will, but it’s hard to defend such a position if you really attend to scripture, which consistently unsettles and upends our expectations.

As a young person who benefitted from all those trips to the planetarium, and whose grandfather also happened to work for NASA, it might not surprise you that if you’d asked me as a kid what I wanted to be when I grew up I would not have said “a priest” - which it took me a while to fully understand was something real people actually became. Instead, I would have said “an astronaut.” And I don’t mean I’d have said this at like five or eight, but well into High School. I wanted to get out there, up there, far away, to dwell in that deep darkness, closer to the mystery and power that molded the stars. Closer, or so I thought, to the heartbeat of God. As I grew up and began discerning a call to ordained ministry and a life of self-giving love, I looked
back this childhood dream tenderly, realizing I never gave up on getting closer to God, drawing nearer to the deep darkness, the hidden wholeness, within and around all that is. But my geography changed as I matured, becoming capable of more nuanced thought and more complex hope and grief. The greatest adventure of all stopped seeming to be out there, up there, far away, but right her, in learning to love and be loved every more fully every day.

This is a window on my story, but it sheds light on an archetypal journey. Becoming truly human always means coming home to this moment, this self, this body, this life, this slice of history, this corner of the cosmos, and finding hidden in plain sight the mysteries we once sought above and beyond us. But where to make our beginning? Where to deepen the journey? There are an infinite number of very good answers to such questions, but it seems that this morning our appointed lessons are pointing toward a single theme: allowing ourselves to be surprised. Surprised to realize our ideas of heaven might need some welcome revision. Surprised like Peter and those he taught that God might not care all that much about the details of religious observance and that once seemed essential – in his case, keeping kosher - and might care more about how those observances keep some people “in” and other “outside” the promise of God’s grace. Surprised, like the disciples in the company of Jesus to be given the simplest and most daunting commandment of all: to love, not only well and generously but with the perfect love of God. Surprised by the challenge and the opportunity this day will hold. Surprised, and encouraged, and courageous, in our willingness to let our old maps pass away and open ourselves to the God who is making all things new.

And so, we turn inward and toward one another. It’s not an academic distinction at all. It turns out, this can make all the difference in the world. Amen.