

God Dwells With Human Beings

Revelation 21:1-3; 22:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them....'

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face... and there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light...." (New Revised Standard Version)

Commentary

In Revelation 21 and 22, John describes the coming of a new world, with a “new Jerusalem,” descending from heaven (21:2; cf. 3:12). The new city is paradise on earth. A shining river with life-giving water flows through its center. The tree of life grows on the banks of the river, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations who stream through city gates that never shut.

City gates of course are typically open in the daytime and closed at night. The gates are never closed in New Jerusalem, because there is no night there. The radiance of God lights the city, and God is ever present.

In 21:3, we're told that God's home will now be among humans. God will dwell with us and be our God.

In Greek, the words “home”¹ and “dwell”² in this passage are based on the same root word. It refers to a “tent” or “tabernacle.” This, by the way, is the same word that appears in John 1:14, “the word became flesh and *dwelled* among us.” In the new world now emerging, God is “pitching tent” with human beings; living where we live; going where we go.

The idea of God pitching tent with human beings recalls the wilderness tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. Between the time God liberated Israel from slavery and the time

¹*skene*, pronounced skay-nay

² *skenosei*, pronounced skay-no-say

they entered the land of Canaan, they spent a long period living more or less as nomads in the desert wilderness east of the Jordan River. According to biblical tradition, during this time of wilderness wandering, God camped with them, traveling with them from place to place in a tent, a tabernacle (see, for example, Exodus 26; 36; and 40; Numbers 1; 3; and 9).

It was an uncertain time for the people. Their unsettled life left them unsure what the future would hold. They constantly fought the urge to panic, to hoard, to idolize material wealth. They grumbled against their leadership and even griped about being free. With revised memories of what it was really like to be a slave, they longed for the “good old days” of slavery, when at least they could count on having something to eat.

But, in spite of all that, the Bible also views the wilderness as a time and place of total reliance on God. In the wilderness, God provides miraculous food, “manna,” that has a curious quality. People who are weak and people who are strong are able to gather different amounts of the stuff. But when they get back to their tents to eat their supper, they discover that everyone has exactly what they need. No one has too much, and no one has too little (Exodus 16:17-18). Wilderness manna can’t be hoarded. In fact, it rots if you try. The only exception to this rule comes on the day before the people’s mandated period of unemployment, the sabbath. On that day, the people get a double portion, food for today and tomorrow as well.

Wilderness food has another curious feature related to its use in the the wilderness tabernacle, the tent where God was thought to reside. A table sat in front of God’s throne chair which was shrouded in curtains at the center of the tent (Exodus 25:23-30; Numbers 4). A lampstand stood opposite the table to illuminate the room (Exodus 25:31-40). The table was for the “bread of the presence,” twelve loaves of bread representing the “twelve tribes” (that is, the whole people). The priestly representatives of the people were told to place twelve new loaves on the table every sabbath day, as gifts to God. But an odd thing happened when the priests offered these gifts on behalf of the people. The gifts were transformed, reversed: “Aaron will set them before God as a commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant forever. The loaves will be for Aaron and his descendants, who will eat them in a holy place” (Leviticus 24:8-9).

At the wilderness table of God’s presence, the offering of the people to God becomes the gift of God back to the people. At the table of God’s presence, giving is a two-way transaction. We reach out and give to the work of God in the world. But the work of God is the feeding and healing of the people. In God’s presence, gifts given become gifts received.

John received his vision in a wilderness time for the churches of Asia Minor. Christians were being pressured by people outside the churches and even inside the churches to succumb to the values of Roman imperial culture, to participate in the worship of wealth and power, to follow the elaborate social rules that kept people divided from one another, rigidly “in their proper place” in the hierarchies of wealth and prestige that made many people slaves, that kept women beneath men, that kept a few people rich

beyond measure while many others starved to death. At least one Christian John knows has been killed for his refusal to renounce the values of Christ and adopt the values of the empire (Revelation 2:13), and John expects more of this to happen (6:9-11; 7:9-17; 20:4). These are uncertain, disconcerting times. But John receives a vision of a world being transformed even now.

He describes it at the beginning of Revelation as the throne room of God, illuminated not just by one lampstand, but by seven (1:12), corresponding to the seven churches to whom John writes. The lampstands are the seven churches (1:20), and in their presence stands the Risen Christ (1:13)!

At the end of Revelation, John describes the immediate presence of God as New Jerusalem, descending from heaven. But in New Jerusalem, there is no temple because God is “pitching tent” with human beings. Intimately, completely, eternally present, God chooses to camp where the people are.

Times are often difficult. But John’s vision reminds us that God is in our midst. Even now, a new world is being born. There is no time, the Risen Christ tells John, to seal up the words of this vision for publication at some far-off date (22:10; cf. Daniel 12:4, 9). The time is now! The new world of God’s unmediated presence is breaking into history now.

And at the table of God’s presence, miracles happen. Our gifts to God become God’s gifts to us. Manna is given. Loaves abound.

Excursus: Daily Bread

Matthew 6:9-15

You should pray in this manner: "Our father in heaven, holy is your name. Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done – as in heaven, so on earth! Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Release us from our debts, as we also release our debtors. Do not lead us into trial, but save us from evil." For if you release others from their false steps, your father in heaven will also release you. But if you do not release others, your father in heaven will not release your false steps.

Luke 11:2-4

He said to them, "Whenever you pray, say, "Father, holy is your name. Let your kingdom come! Give us each day our bread for tomorrow. And release us from our sins, for we also release everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into trial."

The reference to bread in the Lord's prayer alludes to the manna story in Exodus 16. It is difficult to know just how to translate the Greek term *epiousios* that tells us exactly what kind of bread this is. It means either "what's necessary for each day" ("daily") or "what's necessary for the following day" ("tomorrow"). As an allusion to the manna story in Exodus, the ambiguity is rather nice, because manna lasts only a day before it rots, except on the sixth day when you can collect "tomorrow's" bread and have it keep through the end of sabbath.

When read the Lord's prayer alongside the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21-22, an even more interesting meaning comes more clearly to light. Requesting tomorrow's bread today becomes a prayer of hope and confidence that God's new world is in fact being born in our very midst in the here and now. Such a reading makes sense in the broader context of the prayer Jesus gives his disciples: "Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done -- as in heaven, so on earth!" Tomorrow's bread is already baked and ready for distribution today. God is even now bending the world to play by new rules of abundant life for all.

Possible sermon points

- If we really are living in God's presence and sitting at God's table, we can be confident enough to share our possessions with joy. In sharing, we ourselves are blessed.
- In many ways, our church and our world finds itself in a wilderness. The situation is frightening sometimes, but we have signs that God really is present -- name a few. At the table of presence our willingness to share our possessions freely becomes nourishment and blessing for us as well.
- Explore ways we can cultivate an attitude of trust and hope. Discuss how such an attitude might have an impact on the way we view and use the wealth we have.
- Go to the Division of Overseas Ministries or the Week of Compassion websites and read about the work and witness of our partners in Congo or Haiti or Bosnia or among

Iraqi refugees in the Middle East or among hurricane survivors along the Gulf Coast. Lift up ways our sisters and brothers in these difficult circumstances find hope and use their possessions.

- Disciples pastor Vic Hunter retells a story about the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria and a sincere couple who fled the Spanish Inquisition. The heroes are Jacobo and Esperanza and of course Rabbi Luria. It's a moving tale about sharing bread and how God's work is done when we are willing to give. The book is Victor L. Hunter, *Desert Hearts, Healing Fountains: Gaining Pastoral Vocational Clarity* (Chalice Press, 2003).

Worship resources

Call to Worship

God is our light! The gates are ever open! Let the nations stream to the city of God! Let the peoples drink from the river of life. Let everyone eat from the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations!

Amen! Come New Jerusalem! Come Lord Jesus!

Opening Prayer

God of presence who leads the people through wilderness times, make your home with us this day. Lead us, feed us, and make us your people. Give us generous hearts that mirror your heart, O God of compassion, blessing, and love.

Amen.

Call to offering

In the wilderness, God feeds us. To the city of light, God calls us. Let us bring our gifts for the work of God, the healing of the nations. And in so doing, may we be fed and healed.

Lord's prayer -- the version your community typically says or the following:

God in heaven, you are like a father and mother to us. Holy is your name! Let your kingdom come! Let your will be done – as in heaven, so on earth! Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Release us from our debts, as we also release our debtors. Do not lead us into trial, but save us from evil."

Call to communion

At the table of God's presence, our gifts are transformed. We freely offer and are richly fed. Here our eyes are opened and we see that we stand in the presence of the Risen Christ, wounded by the greed and hatred of the world, but not defeated. The Lamb that was slain lives! A new world is born in our very midst! Come to the table of the presence of God! Eat the loaf! Drink the cup of life! Come to the table! Be nourished and healed.

Possible hymns from *Chalice Hymnal*

All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly	419
This is the Day of New Beginnings	518
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms	560
Precious Lord, Take My Hand	628
Now We Come Before God's Presence	410
Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ	422
I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table	424
We've A Story to Tell to the Nations	484
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling	517
We Are Walking (Siyahamba/Caminando)	442
Lead On, O Cloud of Presence	633
God Be with You Till We Meet Again	434

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