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Revelation 21:1-8

35th Message

Bernard Bell

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AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

“Somewhere over the rainbow way up high, there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.” So sang Dorothy in her monochrome world of Kansas. Was she right? Is there a technicolor land beyond the rainbow? Or, to use another metaphor, is there a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? What lies at the end of your rainbow? For many the pot of gold is “the American dream.” This used to be a white picket fence with a station wagon in the driveway and three cleanly-scrubbed kids. A few years ago it was the payout from a successful IPO. Those particular visions might have faded a bit but the dream lives on. Perhaps it’s getting a job at Google, or making VP. We’re told that the emerging generations are disillusioned with these dreams of their parents, but there are plenty of others who want in on the action. The current immigration debate is partly about how to ration access to this pot of gold, and in what order people should stand in line.

If people have a vision of the future they can endure all manner of hardship in the present. But people without the sense of an ending lose hope and even the will to live. Tragically, many in the closing years of their lives realize that what they’ve striven for has been in vain. Maybe they found the pot of gold, but it didn’t bring them the satisfaction they were expecting. Maybe they didn’t find the pot at all. And so they spend the closing years of their lives desperately trying to tie together the loose ends of their narrative, trying to find the sense of an ending.

The Bible understands life with God as a pilgrimage, a journey towards a destination. The way is not always easy, and calls for faith. Israel made a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. This journey is portrayed in the second bay of our new window. Each year the Israelites were invited to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, there to feast with God. The destination of Israel’s journey was God himself, indwelling his temple in Jerusalem. The New Testament also understands the Christian life as a journey. Our service today is shaped around this theme of pilgrimage.

What lies at the end of your journey? What lies at the end of your rainbow? Do you have the sense of an ending? More importantly, what lies at the end of God’s rainbow?

A rainbow arches across our new window. Our Scripture reading this morning (Gen 8:20-22; 9:1, 8-17) describes the origins of this rainbow in the aftermath of the Flood. Mankind had quickly frustrated the purposes for which God had made him. Just six chapters into the Bible, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5). He wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and began over with Noah. But God was under no illusions that this had solved the problem of human sin and evil. Nevertheless, he committed himself to keep his creation going: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (Gen 8:21). He put

his rainbow in the sky as a sign of this commitment. All that happens subsequently, including all evil, happens under the protective cover of this rainbow, this commitment of God to keep his world going.

The rainbow is a testament to God’s covenant loyalty. Our call to worship called on us to “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Ps 118:1, 29). The Hebrew word for love here is *hesed*, for which we have no word in English. It denotes actions that are loyal to covenant. This truth became a foundational creed for Israel; we find it throughout the Hebrew scriptures, especially the psalter: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” The Lord’s loyal love endures forever, to the far horizon of time. What lies on that far horizon? What lies at the end of God’s rainbow? Today, 66 books and nearly 1200 chapters after the beginning of the rainbow, we finally arrive at its end.

I liken Revelation to an art gallery in which each of John’s visions is a painting on the wall. These paintings are arranged in rooms. We are currently in the second last room (19:11–21:8), whose theme is God’s ultimate response to evil. Three paintings on the first wall (19:11–21) showed God’s conquering hero who effortlessly cuts down his enemies. Two paintings on the second wall (20:1–6) showed Satan bound while God’s people are delivered through death into new life. Two paintings on the third wall (20:7–15) showed the removal of all evil: Satan, death and Hades. We now turn our attention to the fourth wall on which hangs a single painting, showing the final aspect of God’s response to evil. It also serves as the doorway into the next room, the New Jerusalem room (21:9–22:5). Here in these last two chapters of the Bible, all the different strands of the Biblical story, of the metanarrative, are gathered together in consummation. We are given a magnificent ending, one which makes sense of the entire Bible.

A New Creation (21:1)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (21:1 NIV)

The first thing that John sees is a new heaven and a new earth. The first cosmos had been marred by sin, but God had kept it going, putting his bow in the sky as a sign of that commitment. With all evil removed to the lake of fire, the cosmos is now renewed. What is the relationship between this world and the future world? People make two different mistakes here, belittling either this world or the future one. It is important to affirm that at the end of the rainbow lies a very real place. A popular image of heaven is of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp. No wonder people don’t think much about heaven! This new cosmos will be a very real place, indeed far more real than we can possibly imagine. As C. S. Lewis describes it in the closing pages of *The Last Battle*, compared to that world we are now living in the Shadowlands. I cannot imagine what that future world will be like, for I cannot imagine a world without decay and death.

The future world will be real beyond imagining but this doesn't mean I should belittle this world. The fact that the cosmos will be renewed does not mean that we can abuse the current cosmos. This is still my Father's world, and we are still entrusted with stewardship of this earth.

In this renewed cosmos John sees that there is no longer any sea. This does not mean that all who love the beach and the ocean will be disappointed. Throughout Scripture the sea is symbolic of chaos and disorder. When God started to form the first cosmos the earth was a blank slate, covered with sea and darkness; it was neither formed nor filled (Gen 1:2). Into this unformed world God spoke order, driving back the darkness and the sea. He did not entirely eliminate the darkness and the sea, but in the new cosmos the sea and the darkness will be completely eliminated. Creation began with an undifferentiated world: only darkness and sea. The renewed cosmos will again be undifferentiated: no darkness or sea. One has no order, the other has complete order.

The new cosmos which John sees is not just a restoration of the world to the state of Genesis 1, but a perfection of it. Though the world which God formed in Genesis 1 was very good, that is, it fulfilled the purposes for which God created it, there is a realm which lies beyond the very good. We have an intimation of this in the seventh day which God sanctified, moving it into a realm beyond the other six days. Beyond the very good lies the perfect. It will become clear in these last two chapters of Revelation that the new cosmos is entirely holy. But this is the same as saying there is no more sea.

We live in the middle of times in which God speaks order into chaos. He did so in the beginning. He does so now, speaking order into our disordered world:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17)

God is already at work bringing about his new creation in the lives of his people.

New Jerusalem (21:2-4)

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (21:2-4)

John's next vision is more focused: within this new cosmos he sees the new Jerusalem. Revelation, and indeed the whole Bible, is a tale of two cities: the earthly city and the heavenly city. The earthly city is built by human hands; it was first built when Cain went out from the Lord's presence (Gen 4:17). It is portrayed in Revelation and elsewhere as a prostitute for it seductively deceives its inhabitants into idolatry. It is the great city, built by those who live outside God's presence. It is Babylon. The heavenly city is the holy city, in which God's people dwell in his presence; it is portrayed as the bride. The city that John sees is a new Jerusalem. It is new because the first Jerusalem was ruined: it had become indistinguishable from Babylon the great city. John sees this city coming down from heaven for

its builder and architect is God. It is the holy city. The next vision, which we'll look at next week, shows that this city fills the whole cosmos.

Here, as elsewhere in this book, we have a juxtaposition of what John sees and what he hears; the two must be taken together to understand the vision. The voice which John hears speaks from the throne; it speaks with divine authority, giving God's explanation of the significance of the new Jerusalem. The holy city is the place where God and his people dwell together. This was true of the first Jerusalem, the destiny of Israel's pilgrimage. As Israel made this pilgrimage, God put his presence among his people in the tabernacle. The English "tabernacle" is derived from the Latin word for tent. Though the Hebrew Bible does refer to the tabernacle as "the tent," its usual word for it is *mishkan*, which means "dwelling place." The tabernacle was God's movable dwelling place where he was present in the midst of his people.

Once Israel reached the Promised Land and king David had taken possession of Jerusalem, the tabernacle was replaced by a permanent structure, the temple. But the theology remained the same: God's dwelling place in the midst of his people, the temple within the city. At the heart of both tabernacle and temple was the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place. Here God placed his presence, manifest as his glory cloud—what Jews would later call his Shekinah, his "indwelling."

Repeatedly God said to Israel, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was in Jerusalem that God did just that. Tragically, Israel rebelled against God's presence, until God removed that presence, prior to handing the city over to Babylon for destruction. In Jesus, God again put his presence among his people, as John wrote:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Again Israel rebelled against God's presence, and again God removed his presence before handing Jerusalem over to the new Babylon, Rome. But God will not be put off his covenant purposes by the lack of cooperation by the people he has made. At the end of his rainbow lies a new Jerusalem. Here the climactic cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Here in the new Jerusalem God and his people live together in fulfilment of his covenant purposes. This is why God has kept his cosmos running under the protective sign of his rainbow: so that he can redeem a people for his presence.

God has no need of our presence, for the triune Godhead is a community of perfect love and fellowship. Nevertheless God delights in our presence, because this is what he has created us for. As Augustine put it in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. The children's carol petitions Jesus to "fit us for heaven to dwell with Thee there." Fitting us for heaven to dwell with him there requires dealing with the problem of sin. This is what God has done in Christ and is doing through his Spirit.

In chapter 18 John saw the fall of Babylon. Babylon, the earthly city, must fall to make way for the heavenly city to descend. John saw that in this fallen Babylon certain things would not be seen or heard again: the music of harpists and musicians, light, the voice of bride and bridegroom (Rev 18:22-23). In these last two chapters John

sees and hears that within the New Jerusalem there are also certain things that will no longer exist—seven of them: the sea (21:1), death, mourning, crying and pain (21:4), night (22:5), and any cursed thing (22:3). In this New Jerusalem all is put right, all is brought to a satisfying ending.

It is Done! (21:5-8)

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” (21:5-8)

Next John hears God himself speak, the first time he has heard his direct voice since 1:8. God’s statement, “I am making all things new!” confirms John’s vision of a new cosmos (21:1). God commands John to write this down, because these words are faithful and true. The faithful and true word of God is a major theme of this book. John describes the entire contents of this book, everything he saw, as being “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2). Believers are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The word of God is ultimately Jesus himself, who, as God’s faithful servant and prophet, both bore testimony to that word and is that word. Among his names are “Faithful and True” and “the Word of God” (19:11, 13).

Jesus is God’s answer to all the lies and deceits of the world. Into a world which had turned its back on God’s word, God sent his own Son both to proclaim God’s word and to be that very Word. Still the world turned its back on God’s word, killing the Son on the cross. Darkness covered the world: God had sent his light into the darkness, but the world preferred the darkness. But even this great evil happened under the canopy of God’s rainbow. Still God kept his world going. This is the scandal of the cross. God is making everything new. His Word is trustworthy and true. His words are trustworthy and true. God does not allow the counterfeit to win. God does not allow the darkness to again cover the earth.

Bearing faithful witness to that word is costly. Jesus was killed for his faithful witness, as was Antipas of Pergamum (2:13). John was exiled to Patmos for his witness (1:9). The believers are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, no matter what happens, because it is faithful and true.

God’s next declaration is “It is done,” a cry we’ve heard once before. Revelation is about the things which must happen (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). What must happen? Twice John hears the cry, “It has happened!” The earthly city must fall—that’s the first proclamation (16:17). The heavenly city must descend—that’s the second proclamation (21:6). God has not made us to live in Babylon, the city built by human hands for those who live outside his presence. He has made us to live in Zion, the holy city built by him for his people to live in his presence. Because God’s word is true, Babylon must fall, and the New Jerusalem must descend. Under the cover of his rainbow God keeps his world going while he turns those who are habitually rebellious

into those who are fit for his presence, while he turns residents of Babylon into residents of Zion.

God does this because he is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the Beginning and the End. He is the originator of all things, the creator of the first cosmos. He is the consummator of all things, the creator of the restored cosmos. In all things he has the pre-eminence. Therefore our thinking must begin and end with him. This is why the Alpha and Omega symbol is at the very top of our window. This is why we can rely on his word. This is why it is faithful and true.

God is the author and sustainer of life: “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Now he graciously invites all to come to him and find life. The popular conception of Revelation is that this is a book full of judgment. Yes, there is judgment, but it is also full of the gospel. What is the gospel? It is the good news that God has triumphed over evil. As Peter repeatedly tells the Jews in the early chapters of Acts: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36); “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead” (3:15); “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (4:10); “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (5:30).

We are all complicit in the death of the Son; we have all preferred darkness to life, the counterfeit to the true. But even the death of the Son took place under God’s protective bow. Even when the world killed his Son, he kept the world going. He put his bow in the sky knowing that “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Gen 8:21). After evil had done its worst on the only one it did not control, God raised his Son to new life and exalted him to his right hand. As we have been singing of late, “Jesus is Lord, the cry that echoes through creation.” Therefore, because of what God has done in Christ, he now invites all to admit their thirst, to admit they’re drinking out of broken cisterns, to admit they’re chasing after the wrong pot of gold, and come to him for the only water that can quench. He calls us to draw water from the wells of salvation (Isa 12:3).

God follows this invitation with a word about the overcomer. Each of the seven messages ended with a promise to the overcomer. The overcomer, or the conqueror, or the victor, is the one who heeds what the Spirit is saying to the churches. He resists what is false and counterfeit, and holds to what is true, namely the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The evil Satanic powers of this world may kill him, thereby seeming to conquer him, but it is the martyrs who conquer Satan and the beast “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (12:11). The saints can resist the dragon and beast because their eyes are on Jesus. They don’t fear the evil forces set against them, because it is God that they fear in holy reverence. “Fear him ye saints and you will then have nothing else to fear.” But if you don’t fear God you will have everything else to fear.

The great reward for each overcomer is entrance into the New Jerusalem, there to hear God say, “I will be his God and he will be my son.” What a great text for Father’s Day!

God immediately follows this word of encouragement to the victor with a sobering reminder that not every one’s journey ends in the new Jerusalem. The eight categories of people whose journey ends in the lake of fire are best understood in antithesis to the overcomer. This verse, like the whole book, serves as a warning to the followers of Jesus at the end of the first century and throughout church his-

tory. The seven churches were living under great pressure—pressure to conform to surrounding society.

There is a disturbing amount of porn in this book: over a third of all the New Testament references to porn are here. The group of Greek words beginning with “porn-” can refer to sexual immorality, as rendered here by most English versions, but all 19 instances in Revelation are likely metaphorical, referring to spiritual adultery, that is, idolatry. Since most pagan religious rites of the ancient world involved real sexual immorality, there is not a large gap between the literal and metaphorical uses of the word group. Babylon is the great prostitute (*pornē*), who has intoxicated the entire world with her seductive adulteries (*porneia*). The earth-dwellers turn their backs upon God and refuse to worship him. Such seductions have sadly penetrated some of the churches. The church in Pergamum tolerates the teaching of Balaam (2:14); the church in Thyatira tolerates the false prophetess Jezebel (2:20). Their teachings are identical: they mislead God’s people into adultery (*porneia*) and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. People in these two churches were being deceived into compromising with the world, presumably in the hopes of an easier life.

The cowardly are those who succumb to this temptation. The unbelieving are those who cease to persist as faithful witnesses. The adulterers, the magicians and the idolaters have all abandoned the worship of him who alone is worthy to be worshiped. They have abandoned the true for the false, the genuine for the counterfeit. They have become people of the lie.

Both the positive statement of verse 7 and the negative statement of verse 8 are a call from God to the saints to persevere in their journey through life.

Revelation is a book about worship; everyone worships. There are two sets of people in the book. One set are the earth-dwellers; they bear the mark of the beast; their city is Babylon, the great city, the prostitute, the earthly city; they worship what is false and counterfeit, what is not worthy to be worshiped. They have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). The other set bear the seal of God; their city is the new Jerusalem; though they are present on earth, their destiny is to be heaven-dwellers; they worship what is true: the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb.

God has given this Revelation through Jesus and his angel to his servant John (1:1) to encourage his people to persevere. He opens their eyes to see the unseen realities that lie beyond the seen world. He sharpens their vision so that they can faithfully navigate their pilgrimage through this earthly life. We don’t live in the hostile world of the Roman Empire, but we still live in a world that is hostile to faithful pilgrimage. Far too often Revelation is considered useful only for filling in our charts of the future. By now I hope you’ve seen that this book has much to say about living our daily lives in the present. It is a call to faithful witness to the one who alone is fit to be worshiped: God and the Lamb. And so we sing, with John Newton, “By faith in Christ I walk with God, with heaven, my journey’s end, in view.”

This is where God’s rainbow leads: to the declaration, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God,” followed by, “It is done!”

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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