

Easter 5C (4/24/2016)

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

God's promise of abundant life often appears faint in the context of death's stark reality. That promise often pales in comparison to our suffering and grief. Sometimes, our hope, slim as it may be, is all we have left. God's promises may not be as tangible as we would like them to be, but they are "trustworthy and true," and sustain us in spite of the reasons to give up hope.

In February, a seminary classmate of mine and his wife had a baby girl, Eliana, who was born with epidermolysis bullosa, a rare genetic disease characterized by extremely fragile skin and persistent blistering. Her care providers at Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago worked around the clock day after day to minimize her complications and manage her severe pain. And, in spite of her illness, in many ways Eliana lived the very full life of a newborn. In her parents' words, "she developed a unique personality that burst the walls of her isolette." She soaked up the love of her parents and grandparents, sparred with her nurses, listened to music and stories, cried like an infant, and learned to self-soothe.¹ But this past Saturday, Eliana finally died of an infection, having spent her last thirty hours in her parents' arms.

When I think about Eliana, I'm not sure that this is a world I very much want to live in. It's Eastertide, and we say that we're "Easter people in a Good

¹

http://www.hultgrenfh.com/home/index.cfm/public:obituaries/view/fh_id/10184/id/3670392/lud/74D55609DEB32100A41A114F0C9C2AF3.

Friday world.” But Good Friday has a way of leaching into even the most joyous season, even the most hope-filled times in life.

Eliana’s memorial service will be held this afternoon in my internship congregation, where her grandfather, my internship supervisor, will preach and preside. He wrote a blog post this past week, “A Monday Morning Sermon to Myself,” acknowledging the difficulty of believing the Easter promise at a time like this:

... a promise isn’t any [of] those things that we would like it to be. We cannot hold a promise in our hands as evidence of its reality. A promise is not the mulligan on the golf tee where you get a do-over when you’ve messed it up. It is not a time machine where we can go back and right the wrongs. A promise is not the fairytale ending of a television show. A promise is not Harry Potter’s magic wand that would allow us to fix things with the flick of a wrist and a fancy incantation.²

Our faith rests on God’s promise of abundant life, but that promise often appears faint in the context of death’s stark reality. That promise often pales in comparison to our suffering and grief. So, when we suffer and grieve – when we are helpless to prevent the death of a child, when we are heartbroken at the loss of a loved one, when we are confronted by overwhelming hurt – what is the source of our hope?

The Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, is overflowing with vivid and highly symbolic imagery arousing the fascination and fears of those who encounter it. The author’s vision is filled with so much mystery that many

² James K. Honig, <https://jameskhonig.com/2016/04/18/a-monday-morning-sermon-to-myself-on-the-promise-of-life-and-the-reality-of-death/>.

of us prefer not to touch it with a ten-foot pole. But Revelation is deeply misunderstood. It is not an encoded blueprint for the end of time, and neither is it a foretelling of the world's destruction. At its heart, Revelation is a message of encouragement to a series of late-first-century Christian communities suffering under the weight of persecution. The culmination of the vision does speak of the future, but it speaks a stunning word of peace:

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, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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;
 he 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.”

Deliverance from suffering and death does not involve escaping from this world, this existence, and slipping away to some distant and ethereal heaven.

Instead, **God's purpose for the fullness of time is to complete the work of incarnation by bringing the splendor of heaven *to Earth*, to renew *this* world by dwelling definitively among us. In the world transformed, an embodied life in complete and eternal unity with God, there will be no place for suffering and death – there will be no epidermolysis bullosa, no**

heartbroken parents, and no grandfather hanging on to hope by a thread and grasping for good news to preach.

Revelation is a vision to sustain us. Barbara Rossing, my teacher and an expert on the book of Revelation, sums it up this way:

Hope is surely Revelation's most profound contribution to our world today. Revelation teaches us a fierce, urgent, and wonderful hope – not an easy comfort, but a hope that knows the reality of terror and evil and still can testify to God's love in the face of that terror.³

Sometimes, our hope, slim as it may be, is all we have left. And, that's all the more reason for love, the companion of hope and faith.⁴ If God gives us a glimpse into the world as it will be someday, it must certainly look like love. The world as it is today so often looks like the cross – unjust, painful, and bound for death. But **the love of Christ defies the despair of the cross, and testifies instead to God's promise of a world without crosses. "Just as I have loved you," Jesus says, "you also should love one another."** When we live in the love of Christ, we live in anticipation of that new world.

Dear church, God's promises may not be as tangible as we would like them to be, but they are "trustworthy and true," to borrow words from Revelation. We can only see dimly the world that God has imagined for us. Nevertheless, we cling to the hope that one day we will see it face to face,⁵ and death will be no more, and God will be all in all.⁶

³ *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, 170.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:26, 28.