

ALL SAINTS DAY 2015 REVELATION 21:1-6

I want you to imagine that this morning I were handing out vacation vouchers. Each voucher is worth a free week of vacation in one of four places. So you need to choose where to spend your week. Will you choose a city you have never visited before? A bustling, lively metropolis, with interesting tourist attractions, museums and cultural centers, entertainment venues, interesting history and architecture? Or will you opt for a break in the country - a retreat miles from anywhere and anyone, maybe a villa overlooking a vineyard, a cabin deep in a mighty forest, a mountain range, a national park, a cottage secluded by acres of golden wheat? Or would you select a cruise – the Caribbean, a trip up the west coast to Alaska, or maybe the Mediterranean. Or, finally, would you be tempted by an all-inclusive beach holiday, lying on your recliner reading or snoozing, a glass of something cool next to you, before rousing yourself to stroll the twenty yards to the water's edge to paddle in the cooling water. Four vacations. You choose. Where is the best vacation on earth? By the way, let me stress this is purely hypothetical. I'm not really giving out vacation vouchers. At the moment. But, when everyone has returned their pledge card, we may be in business. I'm just saying. I'm not ruling anything out. The greatest setting on earth. What is it – city, wilderness, cruise, or beach. Think about that. Actually, don't think about it too much because you won't listen to a word I'm saying. I'll know if you have switched off and are fantasizing about vacations.

Well, the old girl isn't doing very well these days. She is feeling her age. Her bones creek, her joints grate, her whole body groans under the ever-hastening passage of time. Tick tock, one more pain, tick tock, one more loss, tick tock, one more need, tick tock tick tock. Autumn is here, the season of decline, slow death. Chilly mornings and longer evenings point to an icy future. Tick tock. Back in the day it was always spring – the promise of greatness just around the corner. Summers abiding forever. Every minute of every hour a gift from God to be explored to the full, every second pulled and squeezed and sucked for the last tiny droplet of joy and play and dreams. Now tiredness suffocates her like a shroud. Tick tock. The old girl isn't doing very well these days. She longs for release. If only she could taste renewal, if only she might sip the elixir of life, if only she could climb into the sweet fountain of youth and splash and float and drink. Tick tock.

It's getting late. She yearns for a new day, a fresh age when she will be re-invigorated, her suffering will end, her brokenness healed, and her very being transformed in the blinking of eye. She has been called many things in her long and eventful life. Some call her Mother Earth, some refer to her as the blue planet, others the third rock from the sun. We Christians know and revere her as God's Creation. Whatever you call her, you must admit, the old girl isn't doing very well these days.

So what should we do with her? Well today, we hear Good News. Great news. A word that is so splendid, so glorious, so completely outside our ability to even imagine that St John, in our reading from the Book of Revelation, can only use metaphors and pictures

to describe it. The coming of God's Kingdom is so magnificent that it surpasses human ability to visualize, and our language to describe.

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. 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, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell 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." 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 the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

It's All Saints' Day. And just like this worn out, broken old rock we call home, we Christians also wait eagerly for that day. Because it is not just our planet that is going to be renewed; we too will be recreated, resurrected, raised from our place of sleep and brought rejoicing into the dwelling place of God, where pain cannot sting, death cannot stalk, and tears cannot flow – except the tears of joy and laughter that will run down our transfigured, shining faces.

So, what kind of place is this, where God dwells with human beings? Let's go back to those vacations you fantasized about. Those of you who chose the cruise or the beach holiday. You know who you are. Hedonists. Well, I have some bad news for you. It's tucked away near the beginning of that glorious reading from Revelation. It is so unremarkable that you may have missed it. John beholds this extraordinary vision of the dwelling place of God and mankind, and he says that "the sea was no more". "Woah", you beachlovers and cruisers are thinking, "I don't like the sound of this. If this is heaven I'll pick the other place." Well, not so fast. Why does God appear to be anti-ocean? Well it's because to Middle Eastern people in Bible times the sea was a thing to be feared. The Hebrews were poor sailors and so the sea with its immense power, its hidden dangers, and deadly creatures, was a symbol of human powerlessness and mortality. For the original readers of Revelation, the sea meant fear. So when John says there's no sea where God lives he is actually giving hope and security. Fear has been done away with. But there is still water – there's still fishing – it's the river of life flowing through the dwelling place of God and humans, which is there for our refreshment, and healing, and joy.

An end to fear. Our lives are so full of fear, and our society functions the way it does partly because we are scared of things, that I wonder if it's possible to imagine a place from where fear has been banished. It is such a powerful motivator, isn't it? It influences our decisions, it energizes our anger, it gives birth to defensiveness, violence, and lies. I fear rejection and so I reject others first, before they have the chance to reject me. I fear criticism, so I strive with all the time and energy I have to be perfect – in my work, my character, and my personality – trying with all my might to be

the person that will make other people happy, to leave no room for the critical comment, the disapproving word, or the judgmental verdict. I fear being overwhelmed by other people's expectations, or society's demands, or the ruthless daily tidal wave of duty, so I withdraw from relationships, hide from my responsibilities, retreat from all the good things God has created for me to enjoy as part of an abundant life. Now, of course, some fear is necessary in this life, and absolutely, we should fear things that are genuinely harmful and take steps to protect ourselves from those things. But sometimes, because we have been hurt before, we carry unrealistic fears. We see a person who reminds us of someone who once hurt us, and we get defensive. And when we get defensive we end up hurting others and make it much more likely that we will be hurt.

Mass media doesn't help us live lives free of fear, with its constant habit of blowing things up out of all proportion. Local news broadcasts make us scared to go to sleep because of the way they report crime in our neighborhoods. "Coming up after the break, something that will really scare you and what you can do to stay safe." National news programs cause us to worry about global dangers – be they diseases, invasions, or economic meltdown. Fear makes us watch, contentment does not. Advertisers scare us half to death by setting up straw men which threaten our health, safety, financial security, and happiness. And then they burn down those scarecrows with the help of their products.

I wonder if you need a little bit of heaven today. Now. You can't wait for the Kingdom to come before your sea of fear is dried up. You need it now. What is your sea? What tidal wave is right now building on the horizon, moving at terrifying speed towards your boat? What maelstrom is developing in front of you, swirling and spinning and dragging you down in its vortex? What sea monster lurks in the deep preparing to devour you? In the dwelling place of God, there is no sea. Maybe this day you need to tell God about your fear, and then receive the peace that is the birthright of God's children. Because, be assured, although we cannot go to the dwelling place of God just yet a while, the Kingdom is here in part. We can know some of that beautiful land even now.

Now, let me speak to those of you who would spend your holiday voucher on a trip to a place of outstanding natural beauty - the quiet, peaceful ambiance. A piece of real estate that resonates with the sounds of the birds worshipping and the trees waving their arms in praise of God. It's in the beauty of creation that you feel closest to your Creator. In fact, you experience God more in the garden than in the church. Well, like the cruisers and beachgoers, I must disappoint you too. You see, the dwelling place of God that we are moving towards day by day is not a garden. God's story began in a garden, but it ends in a city. And the reason it's a city and not a garden is because God's dwelling place is not just intended for me and God. It's a city. There are going to be billions of people there, and they will include the dear ones whose sainthood we celebrate today. We don't party on our own, we can't live in unbroken loving union with God in isolation, heaven is not a personal ecstasy fest. That's part of its beauty – those other people, some of whom you knew in this life, most of whom you didn't. And so, on

this day of celebration and commemoration we really do look forward to being reunited with loved ones we see no more.

There's a city coming down from heaven, and it is your true home. It is the dwelling place of God. Christ has gone before you to prepare a place for you. In the fullness of time, he will come back for you, and take you there. It's a place without suffering and without fear because these enemies cannot live in God's home. But you will, and so will all those saints we commemorate today. And today you are a little bit nearer than you were yesterday to the resurrection of your body, the renewal of this earth, and your reunion with the saints. The old girl isn't doing very well these days. She is feeling her age. Even so, come Lord Jesus.