

Living into the Newness of God

Revelation 21:1-6

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“See, I am making all things new,” writes St. John in the Revelation. John is actually quoting the prophet Isaiah there, emphasizing the connection between what the prophets had foretold and what he is describing. Sometimes I think about what it means for both our Old and New Testaments to plainly spell out this idea that God is still at work – in the world, in the church, and in each one of us. The Revelation is intended to be the culmination of the biblical message of redemption, as well as (yet again) and give the faithful a word of hope in the midst of a chaotic and oppressive political situation.

In spite of the assurance that God is still transforming us, it is easy to get overwhelmed by all the bad news in our country and our world. In the public sphere, we hear messages of scarcity all the time, designed to make us operate from a place of fear. We do the same thing in the church – 10 seconds on the Internet can turn up dozens of articles predicting the downfall of the church in general and mainline Protestantism in particular. We talk all the time about how and what we should change if we are to remain relevant in our culture, and yet we really don't want to change. We want everyone else to change and become more like us. Instead of resisting change, maybe we should embrace it – not change just for the sake of change, not in a misguided effort to be “cool,” or “attractive,” but in a way that acknowledges that God is always changing us. If God really is making “all things new,” then the one thing that is going to be constant is change, so maybe it is more faithful to live into the newness of God than to fight it all the time.

“This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they

said yes. And there's always room for more...Millenials are tired of the culture wars, tired of Christianity getting entangled with party politics and power. Millenials want to be known by what we're for, not just what we're against. We don't want to choose between science and religion or between our intellectual integrity and our faith. Instead, we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable. We want to talk about the tough stuff-biblical interpretation, religious pluralism, sexuality, racial reconciliation, and social justice-but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers. We want to bring our whole selves through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask (Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*).

I didn't write those words, although I wish I had. They were written by someone who is too soon gone, Rachel Held Evans, progressive Christian writer and speaker. Perhaps you have heard about her lately. Rachel died recently after a short illness. Her body reacted terribly to antibiotics given to her for an infection, and she suffered massive brain seizures. She was put into a medically induced coma on Good Friday to try to stabilize her brain and allow her body to recover. Unfortunately, she never returned to an alert state after that. When the doctors tried to wean her from anti-seizure medication, it became clear that her brain had suffered too much damage for her to survive. She died last Saturday, May 4, at the age of 37.

I never met Rachel, I don't know her personally, and yet I've been surprised by how much I have grieved her premature death. Maybe because today is Mother's Day, I find myself thinking of Rachel's husband, Dan Evans, and their two babies. Their son Henry is three years old, and their daughter Harper turns one this week. It is terrible for the church to lose such an articulate and faithful voice, but at the end of the day those two children have lost their mother,

and they are too young to have much memory of her to sustain them. That is just heartbreaking. I take comfort in the truth articulated in the Revelation that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, that death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” That vision has not been fully realized, but we trust that in God’s time Henry and Harper will see their mother again. Let it be so.

Rachel Held Evans grew up in Dayton, Tennessee and attended Bryan College (in the same town), where her father is an administrator. Dayton is semi-famous for being the town where the Scopes trial was held, and the college is named after William Jennings Bryan, who you may remember argued against teaching scientific principles such as evolution in schools.

So, Rachel was raised in a version of God’s church that many of us would not recognize. Her family and her congregation followed a literalistic interpretation of the Bible that dismissed huge swathes of God’s children as damned to hell and didn’t leave room for Muslims, Jews, homosexuals, and any number of others whom society has long marginalized.

Rachel wrote her first book, titled *Evolving in Monkey Town*, in her early 20s. It is about how, as a young adult she began to question some of the things about God and the church that she had always been taught and had always accepted as true. The book’s title was later changed to *Faith Unraveled*. With humor and graciousness and no trace of a mean spirit she deconstructed the house of cards that was her faith and began to build something else – a faith that called us to truly live the truth that God loves us all. Her subsequent books continue her story – wrestling with scripture, leaving the church of her childhood and finding another that more closely mirrored the inclusive love of the God she had come to know, and figuring out how to live a faith that welcomes everyone and embraces all children of God. In addition to her

books, she writes frequent opinion pieces in national newspapers and she speaks at conferences all over the world. She has become a voice not only for her generation, but for all of us who hate to see the rigidity and fence building that is so often associated with Christianity.

So many times I've read Rachel Held Evans's words and just wanted to stand up and yell "YES!" There are thousands of women pastors who credit Rachel with their vocation, saying that her own theological evolution influenced theirs, and they came to understand that there is indeed a place in the church for women's voices and leadership. There are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who say that her words made them understand that they are not rejected by all churches, and they are loved by God. Muslims and Jews heard her voice and knew that they have allies in the Christian tradition – those of us who want to embrace our differences and care for one another as children of God. And, she even maintained respect and love for the evangelical tradition in which she grew up. She no longer identified with their theology or their politics, but she still considered them her extended family and she respected the sincerity of their convictions.

One of the things I most admire about Rachel is the fact that she had the ability at a young age to at least be open to the possibility that God was doing something new in her and in the church.

When the God she grew up with and certain exclusions within the church ceased to make sense to her, she broadened her view of God. She understood that she was not the one in charge of deciding who God loves, and her study of theology and scripture led her to keep extending that table that she wrote about so beautifully, always making room for more. Such an influence she has had, and her death has hit many of us like a punch to the stomach.

Rachel's evolution hasn't all been a bed of roses. She was pretty much rejected by the

evangelical and fundamentalist communities for the shift in her views. One of her peers told her how disappointed he was that she had become a “cotton candy Christian.” I’m not even sure what that means, but I know it wasn’t complimentary. Even as Rachel lay so ill in the hospital, getting ever closer to death, there were some really awful things posted about her on the Internet – things like people saying that they were praying she would “survive to repent, and see the error of her ways, and set people straight with the truth and save herself and all the people who agree with her from the fires of hell.” I hurt for her when I read that. I hurt for all of us, because I realized how deep the divide is within these different branches of God’s family.

It is when we see that division among us, the chasms that Rachel Held Evans tried so hard to bridge, that we can find solace in the promises of Revelation. “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.” The new heaven and new earth are intended to convey a realm where the discord and strife among us is over, where creation is renewed and transformed by God’s glory. The sea in this context is a metaphor for turbulence and unrest. No more sea, thanks be to God.

New Testament scholar M. Eugene Boring expanded on the image of the city in his commentary on Revelation. He says “A city is the realization of human community, the concrete living out of interdependence as the essential nature of human life. In the individualistic ideal, each person is independent, self-reliant, doing everything for himself or herself. In a city the tasks of life are divided up, each one does a part, and the beauty of life is not a solo but a symphony. As community, a city is not streets or buildings but people. Beneath John’s imagery of pillars, gates, walls, and foundations is the conviction that God’s final dwelling place is in and with God’s people (*Interpretation* Commentary, p. 219).” God’s newness is leading us to a place

or a state of being in which we recognize the image of God in one another and discover all over again the truth that we need each other.

Another statement from Rachel Held Evans's latest book *Inspired* alludes to this expansive love of God. She writes that "The apostles remembered what many modern Christians tend to forget-that what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out but who it lets in."

Amen, sister. Although they express it differently, I believe that Dr. Boring would concur with Rachel's statement that at the table (or city) of God there is always room for one more. Boring is clear in his commentary that the new Jerusalem is a large city characterized by who is included instead of who is left out. Hear what he says: "The temptation of a suspect, marginal minority is to envision some great reversal in which only the faithful few are saved while the overt enemy and nominal friends receive the just reward for their unfaithfulness. One signal of the divine inspiration of John's revelation is that he has not succumbed to this understandable temptation. Throughout, he has pictured the number of the redeemed as uncountable. His new Jerusalem is no tiny village of the 'faithful few;' it is a vast city of twelve thousand furlongs (1,500 miles) cubed (*Interpretation Commentary*, p. 221)."

So how will we live into the newness of God? Can we bring ourselves to trust that there is room for all of us in the new Jerusalem? And, more importantly, will we live as if that is true?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.