

*Based on Revelation 21:1-4. A Whole New World*

For the past four months our Adult Education Class has been reading *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart* by Brian McLaren.

In this book, McLaren lays bare what he calls *the catastrophic failure of both our religious and political leaders to address the dominant realities of our time: ecological overshoot, economic injustice, and the increasing likelihood of civilizational collapse*. Even those of us who are trying really hard to address these realities find ourselves grasping at straws and running for cover in this immediate onslaught of tyrannical power run amok at the highest levels of our government.

One morning, a few weeks ago, as we were discussing how, indeed, to cultivate *Life after Doom*, one of our Adult Ed members said something to the effect of, *We have had Utopia, and we have had Dystopia. Now we need a 'New -Opia'!*

In response, I offered *Presby-Opia* as that alternative vision. We are *Presbyterian*, after all, at least in our name. I thought it was funny. It landed flat. But I think there is something to explore here, so bear with me as I open up that comment a little bit more for further exploration.

*Presbyopia* in the world of optometry is near-sightedness. Old, weary eyes beaten down by the drama of life. The thing that is right in front of us is too blurry to see straight. Like me with the songs in our hymnal, and even now with the large print version, if I hold it too closely, I am completely lost. I have to take a step back, sometimes even remove my glasses — you know, those things that are supposed to *improve* my vision. Only then, from a proper distance, is my sight clear enough to make out what is going on. Then I can join the chorus harmonizing all around me.

Not only that, but, bear with me, there really is the *Presbyterian* approach to the world, literally founded in opposition to tyrannical power. Our form of government was intentionally designed to limit the possibility that any one person would be able to rule by fiat with an iron fist. Our theological worldview insists we are always in need of a new Reformation. Our sacramental life depends on communal solidarity.

Put those two things together — taking a step back in order to see clearly and recovering the roots of our ever-Reforming anti-imperial, community based tradition — and perhaps we do have the alternative vision we need to claim *Life After Doom* in the Way and Spirit of Jesus.

This is what John of Patmos in our Lesson today offers his community of congregations in what was then Asia Minor and what is now Western Turkey. Take a step back from your current reality, John encourages, and recover the roots of your tradition. In doing so, John shares an *apocalypso* (in Greek), a Revelation (in English),

an unveiling, a vision of how to cultivate courage through the unfolding horror into its inevitable collapse and ultimate transfiguration into the very City of God right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

John, himself, is more than aware of the tyrannical power of his time. He lives it. Not to be confused with the disciple of Jesus also named John, John of Patmos writes some 65 years after the death of Jesus, from exile, to a community that is just not sure how they can take it anymore. Some scholars suggest John is a refugee from the war the Romans won twenty years earlier, crushing Jerusalem, destroying the Temple, and driving hundreds of thousands into slavery. Whether or not that is true about John, himself, we can be certain the churches that receive his message are filled with such refugees. Taunting and slurs and ever present reminders of their subordination fill their days. Life Is Hard.

Into that hard, seemingly doomed life, John offers *Revelation*, not as a terror tale or end-times blueprint, not as a *Left Behind* Rapture-validated theological excuse for ongoing genocide in the Middle East in order to bring about the Second Coming, but as a spiritual x-ray of tyrannical power that shows us the fracture *AND* the healing all in the same image. As scholar Barbara A. Rossing says, *John wrote the book of Revelation in order to lift up the vision of Jesus as a counter-message to the empire's theology of Victory. Pax Romana* in John's telling does not bring *peace through victory* as the Empire likes to proclaim; it brings death through destruction. The alternative, John shows, *Pax Christi*, brings life through nonviolent love.

Revelation, it turns out, is like Dorothy and Toto in *The Wizard of Oz* pulling back the curtain on the Empire, declaring the Emperor has no clothes, and finding at the end of the day, the way back home has been with them all along.

For us, now, having reviewed the medical, theological, and biblical meaning of *Presby-Opia*, we come back to the particular vision cast in our Lesson, from the Twenty-First Chapter of the Book of Revelation. A vision of the holy city coming down of out heaven. A vision of the marriage of heaven and earth. A vision of the presence of God-Ever-With-Us to heal our collective hurt and transfigure the death-dealing *power-over* forces that seem to conquer all around us into life-affirming *power-with* love that will always win at the end of the day. A vision not of pearly gates and crystal mansions in a pie in the sky by and by but of a literal lived reality within a small, fierce, resilient community of faith re-aligning itself over and over again with the Way and Spirit of Jesus, against all odds, no matter the cost.

This is who the church must be today.

Motivated by a vision of *Presby-Opia*, the church today must be a place of Refuge, here in this sanctuary. Refuge on a Day of Sabbath Rest. Refuge extending through The Cloud. Refuge into every gathering, large or small, of *all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging* in a world of burnout and collapse and cruelty.

Motivated by a vision of *Presby-Opia*, the church today must be a place of Resilience, in our worship. Resilience through our singing. Resilience by Sharing the Care. Resilience of Poetry and processing and preparing for the next right thing as it unfolds in the Way and Spirit of Jesus.

Motivated by a vision of *Presby-Opia*, the church today must be a place of Resistance, in our Public Witness against tyrannical power. Resistance in our PRIDE worship and the PRIDE parade and the PRIDE flag hanging from our window. Resistance in our very commitment to *survive* long enough to resist another day, even when it does truly seem as if all hope is lost.

Motivated by a vision of *Presby-Opia*, the church today must be a place of Re-Imagining a different way of life than the one that currently crushes our spirits. Re-Imagining a way of life rooted not in domination but in interdependence. Re-Imagining a sacred economy to replace our current extraction economy. Re-Imagining a divine ecosystem that is, as Brian McLaren says, *oblivious to the latest polls and economic forecasts*.

Motivated by a vision of *Presby-Opia*, the church today *is already* a place of Refuge, Resilience, Resistance, and Re-Imagining, just as the church of Revelation was, long before it got co-opted by the very Empire it was founded to overcome.

It turns out what we really need is this *old* vision. This ancient vision, as ancient as the land itself. This ancient vision, as ancient as the dream that lives on in the hearts of indigenous peoples throughout the world. This ancient vision, as ancient as the gospel of Jesus in his time. This ancient vision, as ancient as the poetry of revolutionaries and the prayers of the oppressed.

It turns out what we really need is this vision as ancient as the patch of blue from the plane window, as our poet says, *blue lakes and lagoons, blue volcanoes, blue islands in a blue lake, and the land liberated for love*.

In the spirit of that ancient vision, in a land liberated for love, committed to Life After Doom, praying for God's will to be done *on earth as it is in heaven*, let us be the ones who cast this ancient vision forward. Let *us* be the paths of blue. Let *us* be the church where heaven kisses earth.