

## A New Heaven and a New Earth

Sermon 118 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 31, 2021

Revelation 21:1-7

My friend, Victoria, has a book coming out and she's writing the last few chapters now. A true extroverted academic, she enjoys talking about the chapters as they come to fruition. Lucky for me, I find her topic – *Holy Friendships* – to be incredibly fascinating. So as we processed 2 bushels of apples the other weekend, she told me this story from her book and I have had it stuck in my head ever since.

Here's the story as she writes it in the chapter:

*...Carmelle has the gift of noticing the presence of God in big and small moments. As if she is following the movement of the Holy Spirit in her Pentecostal Miami Haitian church shouting out, "Yes, Lord," and "Amen," as the preacher rises to a crescendo. I love to hear Carmelle participate in a conversation, shake her head and say, "Hmfph. Look at God."*

*A loved one is healed from an illness. Look at God.*

*Someone is struggling, and by grace is still making it. Look at God.*

*An innovative idea arises out of two strangers having a conversation. Look at God.*

*I lay my head down to sleep in my safe and comfortable home. Look at God.*

*A holy friend walks alongside another through the valley of the shadow of death. Look at God.*

*Carmelle's proclamation, [Victoria believes], is the essence of what church is all about. Look at God. We gather to say to one another, "Look at God." We offer petitions, sing songs, and read scripture that points us to Look at God. Jesus came in human form to earth to say to us, "Look at God." [And] our job as the church is to say to the world, "Look at God."<sup>1</sup>*

As Victoria tells me this story we are standing in her kitchen. She's holding a peeled and cored apple in one hand and a paring knife in the other (she's about to quarter the remaining pieces of apple, letting them fall into the big bowl that will then refill the stock pot on the stove where the applesauce is being made.) Despite the fact that we have spent the whole day talking as we worked, this story warranted a pause. "Look at God!" she said again, filled with the same awe and wonder that I imagine Carmelle displays every time she says the phrase.

I am intrigued though, by the idea that the church's main vocation is to live with all of our senses engaged so that we can spot it when God breaks through. And when those moments arrive, we name them by saying, "Yes!" "Amen!" "That!" "Look at God!"

A prayer is answered. Look at God!

The storm passes us by. Look at God!

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria White, book forthcoming, *Holy Friendship*

The funds are available. Look at God!  
Forgiveness comes. Look at God!

When our senses are awakened and attuned to the kinds of work God prefers – you know the work of love, justice, peace, and compassion – we really can begin to see God’s handiwork everywhere. Often in surprising ways.

A church in South Bend learned this lesson with their well-established food pantry. It was a program built out of love and concern for the people who lived in the same neighborhood as the church. Many of them were poor by conventional standards and so the church set up the pantry to meet the needs, as they saw them. Though the program was intended to create and enable change – neighbors remained poor and the need for the pantry carried on.

When neighbors would come to get their food, they had to answer some typical questions as part of an interview process. The questions basically sought to find out who they were, where they lived, how much money they had (or didn’t have), and what their expenses were. In worship one Pentecost Sunday a parishioner felt moved by the words of Acts 2 which read: *I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh*. She was troubled by the words of scripture and began to see how their food pantry questionnaire was a direct contradiction to the scripture. “When people come to the food pantry, we ask how poor they are, rather than how rich they are. Peter is saying all people have God’s spirit poured into them.” “We say in worship that ‘God’s spirit flows down on everyone,’ and then we act like it isn’t true.”<sup>2</sup>

The insightful congregant’s questions eventually led the church to evaluate and re-configure the food pantry interview. Interviewers began asking questions to discover the resources that each neighbor already possessed, rather than focusing only on the one or two things (money and food) that they often were lacking. “Do you play an instrument?” “Are you a poet?” “Do you garden?” and at the end of every interview they asked the following questions:

1. What three things do you do well enough that you could teach them to someone else?
2. What three things would you like to learn that you don’t already know?
3. Who, besides God and me (the interviewer), is going to go with you along the way?

Shortly after the church shifted to the new questionnaire, a neighbor named Adele showed up to the pantry. In the process the interviewer heard Adele say that she could cook really good food. “Prove it” they said, and Adele asked what she meant; and the interviewer asked her to cook lunch one day for the custodian, the interviewer, and the pastor of the church. Adele took them up on the offer and made a fantastic lunch. This experience opened the door for the pastor to encourage folks who would come to the neighborhood

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Mather. *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*. 14.

*not* to eat at a restaurant, *not* to cater their business lunches through a well-known business, but rather to invite Adele to provide the meal, earning an income by offering her gift.

Eventually, through networking and several fantastic meals cooked up in Adele's kitchen, her catering business was born: La Chaperrita Catering: Spunky Tex-Mex Food. A year and a half later, Adelita's Fajitas opened up on a busy corner in town.

When the church began to take seriously the idea that God's spirit *truly* is poured out upon all people, they were able to see the work God had already begun, they were able to join in it, and together with Adele, her whole life was changed. Adele came to the pantry expecting to be treated like she was poor. But in her experience she (and the church) discovered just how rich she was. And it led to Adele's financial liberation... Look at God!

Since it was written, the book of Revelation has baffled its audience. In the second century, readers favored a material approach which understood the writings to be predictive in nature, outlining key events that they expected to be immanent. As time moved on and the events did not unfold as the second century audience expected, a new approach emerged and became popular in the early churches. This symbolic interpretation – was championed by the early Father of Christianity, Augustine of Hippo. He understood Revelation to be an “allegory of the Christian life: Satan was bound wherever one turned to God; the New Jerusalem came down from heaven wherever one received God's grace. More pointedly [Augustine of Hippo asserted], the City of God already existed on earth in the form of the church.”

Today's verses mark a turning point in the narrative as the author turns to his hopeful conclusion. The language employed sounds a whole lot like the Hebrew prophets and other Jewish apocalyptic works.

Revelation's “*See I am making all things new*” reminds us of Isaiah's “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). A promise of new creation, new life... a promise of hope that arrives on the heels of struggle. But in both prophetic images *just as* in the book of Acts, when hope arrives in the form of the Holy Spirit, everything old passes away.

So we have to ask for new eyes to see in order to be positioned to say: Look at God!

A visit to the food pantry turns into a career opportunity, Look at God!

A church begins to see in its neighbors the gifts of the Spirit, Look at God!

A pandemic arrives and churches around the world, churches just like ours, find within themselves those with gifts to make everything available online, Look at God!

An empty Fellowship Hall hosts a Tai Chi class on Tuesday afternoons, Look at God!

Despite the saints who are no longer with us, this community presses on to live another day, to dream a new dream, to go into the world with new eyes opened wide and eager to spot the Spirit doing the work the Spirit is so prone to do... the work of making old things new.

*See, the home of God IS among mortals.  
He dwells with them;  
they will be his people  
and God's own self will be with them  
He will wipe every tear from their eyes...  
death is defeated.  
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more  
for the first things have passed away  
(paraphrase)*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See I am making all things new."*

Look at God!