

“All Things New” / Revelation 21:1-6 / Easter 5C / 28 April 2013

“See, I am making all things new.” In the Book of Revelation, God pronounces that final blessing at the end of earthly history, a closing benediction on all the drama, and all the chaos, and all the tragedy of the ages. “See, I'm making all things new.” And this long and rambling book, the Bible—which began back in Genesis with God making all those things that ended up getting old and broken—this book ends with that selfsame God restoring, redeeming, making all things new. New hearts, new hope, new balance, new perspectives! New heaven, new earth! I think I could go for that, couldn't you?

What's your favorite view from an airplane window? I've logged a lot of hours in airplanes down through the years. My favorite flight used to be the long stretch from Paris to Douala (Cameroon), especially the hours spent crossing over the great Sahara Desert, which is so much more than sand dunes. Flying over the Sahara, you see rocky mountain ranges, black as tar and barren as the moon. You see occasional oases, and far, far below, if you're lucky, you might even see a village, a settlement or two. That was my favorite view from an airplane window until our recent trip to Haiti. Now, c'mon. You knew the Haiti stories were coming!

Soaring above the Caribbean at 20,000 feet, you could almost believe that the whole big world below you is a unity, a harmonious place. Everything is part of a visual composition, a work of art: the clear light, the gleaming colors, the long views. Whoever put it together was thinking about how every created thing would fit together in order to please the eye. A newcomer to the planet might assume that such a carefully planned, harmonious place as Earth was peopled only by the most agreeable beings. From high above, there are scrubby islands with white sand beaches; they emerge gently from the waves, punctuating the clearest blue waters I have ever seen. The ocean there is like a gem, translucent; you could see a large fish swimming over its bright floor. As the plane drops a little lower, your first glimpse of Haiti is a coffee-colored streak that invades the Caribbean with cloudy, light brown mud. It's some Haitian river discharging topsoil into the sea. And there, on the furthest edge of sight, looming like a strange dream, vast brown mountains appear out of the blue and brown sea. It's shockingly mountainous, treeless, brown. Somehow awful and majestic all at once. Its folds and its summits, its plains and its beaches: all of it is lovely from up here.

Once the plane touches down in Port-Au-Prince, you realize that Haiti is beautiful up close, too, but it no longer looks like a work of art, elegant and cohesive. No, up close, the beauty is complicated, messy, a very human beauty, which means that it's all mixed up with poverty, and tragedy, and need. The city seems endless, vast, unplanned mazes of badly constructed buildings. There's raucous music the likes of which I've never heard, with a reverberating, trance-like quality to it. You can smell the garbage being burned in dumps, and trash heaps, or simply smoldering on the curbside. People riding donkeys, leading oxcarts, working in rice paddies, people pulling immense flatbed wagons made from the axles of old pickup trucks, people selling everything from pineapples to old audio cassettes—Duran Duran's Greatest Hits—and I have no idea who was buying. The visual effect up close was nothing like the simple, lovely thing you saw from the sky. Up close, it's like a “Where's Waldo” book; it's sensory overload. All of it under the glare of the Caribbean sun meant that I had a constant headache. I lived off Ibuprofen and treated water for a week...until I gave all my medicine away to someone who needed it more than I did. The gleaming smiles, the melodic birdcalls, the scorching sun are all set against a backdrop of agonizing poverty, and perhaps the kindest, most welcoming people on earth.

It was lovelier from a distance, but you can't accomplish anything good from up there. All you can do from above is drop bombs. It was far neater from afar, and it all looked as if it belonged all to a single masterpiece. Up close, it was a teeming, seething mix of wildly colorful cars, crumbling buildings, animals, and people. People! Each of them with a story of his or her own. Each of them as real as myself and with all the same needs, desires, dreams. The world is easier and perhaps a little prettier from a distance. But its best beauty, its human beauty, can only be discovered by those who get in close, who risk relationship with messy people. “See, I'm making all things new. To the thirsty, I

will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

We’ve just read one ancient seer’s vision of a day when all of damaged creation will be restored; all the downtrodden will be lifted up; all the disadvantaged will be treated with dignity and respect; all those who find themselves on the outside will be invited in and given an equal place at life’s rich table. As the seer John tells it, “God will dwell with earth’s people. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. ‘See, I’m making all things new.’” You and I have seen a lot of old things in our day. Old mindsets stuck in deep old ruts. Old hearts clinging to old, old hurts that should have healed years ago. Old hearts nursing old wounds, keeping them painfully fresh, never letting go. Old fears ruling the same tired people from year to weary year. Old ways of thinking, getting people nowhere, old ideas about life, and God, and other people, old ideas that we follow more out of habit than conviction. When yesterday’s visions—which were compelling in their time—become today’s dull routines and old institutions, I think it’s about time for someone to make things—all things—new. “See, I’m making all things new.” And what do you think that ancient-but-not-yet vision of a better world means for you and me? It means getting in close, close where we can see all the wrinkles and the blemishes; that’s the only place where you can hope to make a difference. It means trading our distant, lofty perspective for a view from below, where things are messy and real.

One of my favorite pastimes as we traveled in Haiti was to count the ways that it is and is not like Cameroon. In places, especially in the city, the two countries look exactly the same. The primary difference is that Cameroon is in dense rainforest, and Haiti is so deforested that its lofty mountains resemble an unreclaimed strip mine. One thing both countries have in common is serious hospitality. If you travel through the countryside Africa, you’ll crawl along on dirt roads, only wide enough for a single vehicle. In the dry season, it’s dusty, and that old red dust makes its way into all your clothes, your eyes, your hair. You find that fine red dust in your nostrils, and it makes your teeth gritty. But as annoying as the dust can be, it’s better than the alternative: mud. The distances are long between villages and towns. You can pass through many miles of jungle, without any Get-Go stations, or restaurants, or modern facilities. And yet, even in the middle of nowhere, you’ll find fruit and drinking water set out beside the road, free of charge. It’s usually just bananas, mangoes, papayas. Nothing extravagant, but the poor people of Africa have a tradition of sharing what they have with travelers. Isn’t it funny how these people live out God’s vision for humanity...and many of them don’t even worship the Christian version of God?

Isn’t it ironic that poor Muslim peasants in some rural province of Nigeria will share their meager supplies of food with you, but if you walk into a Christian church in modern America, you feel lucky when someone says “hello”? Isn’t it strange that an outsider—a real outsider—like Greg Mortenson, the guy who wrote the well-known book *Three Cups of Tea*, can show up at a stranger’s hut in Pakistan and be met with a hot meal and the best blanket in the house? But if he showed up hungry and destitute on the steps of an American church, or home, he’d run the risk of spending the night in jail. Is God’s new-old-vision of humanity fulfilled in that? Perhaps by attaching a price tag to everything, the so-called “Christian West” has lost its way.

My last year in seminary, I had a class where they taught us how to officiate at baptisms and the Lord’s Supper, etc. Strangely, it was an elective course; you didn’t have to take it. But I thought I would need it...and I have. As part of the final exam, the professor had each student serve her fake communion in the chapel. You lost points if you didn’t know all the words by heart. You lost points if you were too dramatic or too emotionless. I lost a few points because, while I was standing at the table saying all those words I’d memorized, I looked my professor in the eye too much. She told me afterward, “The words at communion are a prayer, so you need to look just above the congregation’s heads...unless of course, you believe that God is present in the people themselves. If that’s what you believe, then it’s okay to look your congregation in the eye.” Well, I didn’t get a perfect “A” on the final, but you’ll notice that I don’t look over the tops of anyone’s heads while I’m standing at this table,

for I've come to see the living God more in people's faces than above their heads. I've come to see the living God more out there among us than up there above us. God is best seen up close, in the messy lives of real people. This is God's vision for humanity: that you and I might see the face of the living God in the very face of the stranger, to see the face of the living God in every single person we encounter; to stand in awe of every single God-made human being who chances across our path, to cherish each person, and welcome him or her, to know in our soul that that person is a unique expression of God, as beloved as any saint. This table, which has been used for so many centuries as a place to exclude the outsider, is actually God's feast of welcome and peace for all humanity. That's what this table is for: to assemble all those many beloved ones into a single family, at a single table.

"See, I'm making all things new." You can participate in the renewal of the world, in fact it's your life's calling, but you've got to step in close to do it. Stephen Carter, conservative pundit, tells the story of how his was the first black family to buy a big townhouse in a wealthy district of Washington D.C., back in the 1960s. They had moved up from the South, and they were excited about their new home, their new prospects in life...but their new neighbors didn't share their enthusiasm. People stared, glared, hurried past as the family unloaded the moving truck. The lady across the street got home from work, a well-to-do white woman in a beautiful car. She parked in front of her house and shouted across the street: "Hi there! Welcome, welcome," then she ran into her house and came back with a tray full of sandwiches. Carter was impressionable, eleven years old, and he recalled that act of kindness for the rest of his life; many years later, he claimed that one woman's welcome had saved him from bitterness. You, too, are called to take part in making this old world new, but you've got to get in