

“Fixer Upper”

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In ten years of ordination, I have had the opportunity to lead numerous book studies, much like the book we have been studying as a congregation this summer. Typically, in our first meeting I have spent some time talking with the group about the author of the book and his or her background such as education, race, gender, origin stories and the like to truly understand the sociological lens through which the author wrote. Put more simply, we needed to understand where the author was coming from to truly understand what he or she was trying to say.

You may have noticed when I preach, I usually open with some sort of reflection that often includes some context about the scripture that I am about to read. I do this a) because even after ten years of ministry, I often have to jog my own memory about the variety of contexts in scripture, and b) I think it helps to place us all in the mindsets of the author and the intended audience of the particular scripture. Understanding their lenses helps us zero in on the particular truths that are being conveyed in God’s word.

This morning, for instance, our text comes from the book of Revelation. This book, in particular, has a reputation for being dramatic at the very least. To our modern ears, it may even sound a bit psychotic. Pair that with the fact that it has been used and misused by biblical literalists in some pretty harmful ways through the ages. So in the midst of that interpretive noise, it might be helpful for us to know some context of Revelation before we study it this morning, before all that interpretive baggage gets projected.

The author of Revelation is called John of Patmos, so named because of his island of residence when he received this particular vision. He was not one of the original 12 disciples, nor does he claim to be a prophet or any kind of special Christian. He names himself simply as a “brother” who received a vision to be shared with seven churches in Asia Minor, and there has been considerable scholarly debate through the centuries about whether it should even be in the Bible.

Many folks would argue that his visions were lunacy, but it’s important to understand that the apocalyptic literary form in which he wrote was fairly common at the time. As one of my commentaries pointed out, “Just as the imagery of political cartoons (in which donkeys and elephants struggle for power) and science fiction (in which people are “beamed” from planet to starship) does not seem bizarre to the modern reader who recognizes the genre, so apocalyptic imagery did not seem grotesque or weird to the ancient reader.”¹

¹ The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, *Revelation*. Abingdon Press: 2003, p. 2212.



With all that in mind, it is thought that Revelation was a kind of social commentary on the struggle of being early Christians in the midst of the oppression of the Roman Empire; it was meant to both encourage those who were beginning to be persecuted for their faith as well as address complacent church members who did not understand the demands of Christian commitment versus their participation in the surrounding culture.

Given what has happened in our congregation recently, I think it helps to take it a step further to name our own context and experience as we approach this text. We are a church in transition, or more directly stated, we are a church in grief. The most obvious and recent source of this grief is the departure of our Sr. Pastor, Peter Bynum, but the truth is, we have been in grief for some time. Since arriving at FPC, you all have shared with me nostalgia concerning filled pews and countless church programs on a daily basis. This congregation has a long and rich history in this community, and yet, like almost all churches of our time, we have lost members, we have lost leadership, we have lost participation, and we have lost connections. Our culture is changing faster than we can process, and indeed, it will be different this afternoon than when we walked in this morning. We are a church in grief, and we need to name that to understand our own lens through which we see this morning's scripture.

Finally, in the interest of transparency, I feel it is important to name the lens through which I interpret this morning's scripture. I am a preacher's kid who grew up in the church at a time when communal life was more oriented to church participation. I grieve that shift even as I attempt to serve the church in new ways in a new age. My father, who witnessed and ministered faithfully for over 48 years within these transitions in culture and church, is at the end of his life, and I grieve that too.

So, with all of these lenses and pieces laid out before us, let us look to God's word to guide us and equip us as they are shared in Revelation 21:1-6. I invite you to hear God's timeless word through the ages:

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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You might be tempted to think that with all the grief that I just named that I would have selected this text for today, but in fact, the Holy Spirit had this all picked out months ago before we knew how this summer would play out. This scripture is often used at funerals, and indeed, there are no greater words of comfort than, "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." But as I studied these words over the last few weeks,

I was intrigued to find some new ways to digest these words that I had never considered before, because they were used in a different context.

When contemplating God being Alpha and Omega, both the beginning and the end, it's interesting to think about the Bible as our great story of origin and destination. Humanity's story begins in Genesis in the garden of Eden with two people. It sounds lovely, and to be sure, as many of us contemplate retirement and how we would spend our later years, it is often with a vision of a Garden of Eden of our own - some place with lots of land, quiet, and privacy. But as Revelation reveals, our final destination is not to be restored to the quiet garden but instead to the big city. John of Patmos describes a holy city, the new Jerusalem, brimming with people from every corner of the earth. This might seem like bad news to the introverts among us and those who like fences and walls and privacy. Our final destination is wildly inclusive, and there is room for everyone, not just those who invested in land early.

The second thing that is interesting to me about this text is that this new heaven and new earth isn't a grand escape to some newly created place beyond the limits of our known universe. John tells us that God comes down out of heaven to make a home among us. God so loved the world so much that God not only gave God's only Son, but God decided to pack God's things and spend eternity with us in a loud, bustling city. So often we talk about sin and death and brokenness and look to the day that we will be swept up to heaven to some new location, some alternative reality when in fact, this polluted, beaten up planet is exactly the place God wants to live. It is intriguing to me that God still views this world so lovingly created as having "good bones." God is always making things new, and neither us nor our planet are being written off.

The third thing that struck me is that there is no mention of a Temple in this holy city that is God's home. There is no church, no central place to encounter and worship God, because guess what? Everything is church now. Every person, every home, every tree, every animal and every plant is holy, put to sacred use. God pulls together every speck and tear, and it all becomes part of the sacred community.

And that is the basic thesis of Diana Butler Bass' book *Grounded* that our congregation has been working through this summer. This is our final week of study, and in fact, the title of her last chapter is *Revelation*.² If you haven't had a chance to read it yet or have missed our discussions, the basic question she poses is "Where is God?" She talks about how our churches have been built around a vertical faith, an elevator theology of sorts, where we have perceived God's home in the heavens and understood the church as our sole mediator with God. Our architecture, programming, and prayers have reflected this theology, and Bass theorizes that the reason we've seen such decline in church participation is because a spiritual revolution is taking place in our culture. It is not that people have stopped believing in God, per se, but instead they are seeking God out in the world rather than the pews. They are making a horizontal shift of faith rather than straining their necks looking skyward to some distant, far off place to catch a glimpse of God.

² Bass, Diana Butler. "Revelation." *Grounded: Finding God in the World A Spiritual Revolution*, HarperOne, 2015.

Each week, we have been reading through the book and discussing the ways that we find God in the basic elements of creation all around us: dirt, water, and sky. We then talked about the presence of God discovered in our origins, our homes, our neighborhoods and common spaces and how viewing God in these spaces changes how we inhabit and interact with the world around us. She says, “We are constantly creating a sacred architecture of dwelling – of God’s dwelling and ours – as we weave nature and the built environment into a web of meaning.”³

In this week’s chapter, she also talks more specifically about the decline of the church. As of 2015, the number of religiously unaffiliated people has grown from 16% to 23%, a trend that has been building at an alarming rate since the 1970s.⁴ At our recent Presbytery meeting, our new Executive Presbyter Jan Edmiston made the statement that EVERY church is in transition, even those who appear to have stronger numbers than others. As I mentioned earlier, my father spent most of his career serving these churches in transition. Even during the years that First Presbyterian was experiencing growth and had record numbers in the youth program, at Wednesday Night Fellowship and at worship on Sundays, my father was serving dying churches. He wrote his doctoral thesis on church redevelopment, and his career was spent trying to revitalize churches that were in danger of shutting their doors. From my young, selfish perspective, we would move to a church that had no children’s Sunday School or youth program, and right about the time those programs were added and off to a great success, we moved to the next struggling church.

The point I’m trying to make is that the church has been in transition my whole 43 years of life, even though I have both been a member of and served thriving, growing churches. Diana Butler Bass’ thesis about this spiritual revolution feels spot on to me, because while I grieve the loss of numbers and participation in our church buildings, God’s spirit and energy is alive and well on the streets of our world. While many fuss and fume that the Millennial’s and yet-to-be named future generations’ declining participation in traditional church is to blame, I would argue that they encounter and bear witness to God’s saving love at a level that puts prior generations to shame.

If you don’t believe me, spend some time with our other Associate Pastor Rachel Vogado. She’s on vacation right now, but she will be back in the office tomorrow. Ask her where she sees God’s spirit at work these days. Ask one of our youth who just came back from the Montreat Youth Conference. They will be leading us in worship at the end of September to bear witness to what they saw in those mountains. Ask them what God is doing in the hallways of their schools, in their friendships, and their extracurricular activities. Ask Casey Aldridge who is a child of this church. He has been hard at work at Princeton Theological Seminary learning theology and Greek, and he has been literally marching in the streets for causes of justice. He also just represented our Presbytery at General Assembly this summer. He will be back here with us next week as our guest preacher, and I know he wants to tell you all about how God’s spirit is out in the streets, how God has made a home among us.

³ Bass, p. 274.

⁴ Bass, p. 276.

Folks, this time of transition at First Presbyterian Church is a watershed moment for us. I believe it is a massive opportunity for us and, perhaps, a bit of a test. How we respond over the next few months and years will tell a lot about what the future of FPC will be. I can tell you, from my perspective, that I feel hopeful about the future. Our Strategic Plan Vision Team began their work with this book that we have been reading over the summer. The plan they put forth pays close attention and takes seriously this spiritual revolution taking place all around us.

In the midst of our grief, the temptation to run back to the old ways of doing church will be overwhelming. I had a therapist once tell me, "When you are stressed, you regress," and that is most certainly a place of vulnerability for us right now. Believe me when I say that I have been weeping over low attendance numbers. I have been weeping over the departure of Peter Bynum. I have been weeping over the loss of my father and what his ministry represents. I share your longing for the old days. But now is not the time to lose nerve. Let's not forget all the wonderful things we learned together these past few years and the building energy of a new day.

I think I've shared in one of my Wednesday night presentations about my addiction to the show "Fixer Upper." If you've never seen it, it is a reality show on HGTV featuring Chip and Joanna Gaines who restore homes in the community of Waco, TX. They work with potential homeowners touring old, run down, dilapidated houses and try to sell the prospective homeowners on their vision of restoring the house to the home of their dreams. Each episode presents homeowners with unique and varying situations who feel nervous and skeptical about retrofitting their needs into an old house. With time, faith, and a demo day, Chip and Joanna along with their team work their magic to create something that most of us could never visualize. I tend to love all home shows, but I think what I love most about Fixer Upper is they never try to restore the home to its previous glory, nor do they tear it down. Instead, they take all of the wonderful elements of the old home and bring in new elements to make it a comfortable, welcoming home that is functional by today's standards of living. They restore hardwoods and recover shiplap, but they aren't afraid to knock down some walls and reconfigure the entire floor plan to make it work. Chip and JoJo's famous catch phrase is "Do you have the guts to take on a fixer upper," because it takes a lot of nerve to take the leap of faith and see the project through.

A great example of this in the church is our new prayer room which will be finished in a few weeks. This prayer room came straight from the work of our Strategic Plan as a way of creating a communal space that transcends religious affiliation to encounter God in a way that is more horizontal and accessible for this new age in which we live. We are converting Rec Hall which is an old space that was used for generations by the Boy Scouts, VBS, and children's theater productions. Mack Morgan, a child of this church, is working on his Eagle Scout project to create some of the prayer stations up on the stage. Like the rest of the prayer room, he will be incorporating wood and furniture that has been serving this church for decades as well as bringing in new elements to create a whole new way of encountering God. This repurposing of materials and spiritual resources is not only a practical

conservation and stewardship effort, but it honors our past, it honors our present and it honors our future with God.

And I think that is a lot like the vision cast by John of Patmos in this morning's text in Revelation. There is a lot that is broken and failing, and we are grieving that. But this world has good bones. This church has good bones. God sure thinks so. Revelation promises that God's home is here on earth, not in some far away place. God is not abandoning us or taking up residence in another world. God is taking these good bones and making all things new. One of the concepts that Bass invokes in this week's chapter is Matthew Fox's idea of us being co-creators with God. We have a hand in creation. Bass says, "If we do not like the world or are afraid of it, we have had a hand in that. And if we made a mess, we can clean it up and do better. We are what we make."⁵

Another way of saying this is the famous quote from Ghandi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Perhaps we can take it a step further and "Be the change God wishes to see in the world." As God makes a home with us, this is our big moment. How will First Presbyterian be co-creators with God in the new Jerusalem? Clearly, God has the guts to take on a fixer upper. Do we? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁵ Bass, pp. 275.