

Nov 19 - Begin with the End in Mind (Revelation 19)

In each of the gospels there are extended teaching discourses the night before Jesus' crucifixion. The teaching prepares the disciples for his departure; encouraging, equipping and forming them to carry on the work of the kingdom. A good portion of that teaching is about the end. As if to say - as you press into Kingdom work - as you live into my reign over all things begin with the end in mind.

Read John 14:1-7

1. This text is often used to imagine the promise of Heaven - a spiritual and ethereal future. How does a belief in this kind of future shape our life as church?

There has been a dualism that has infiltrated the Christian faith. A dualism that is foreign to the scriptures. This dualism sees the soul separate from the body upon death and depending on your trust in Jesus (or not), your soul is destined to either a heavenly home or a lake of fire.

As a result, the primary work of the church is often seen as evangelism. Inviting others to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior so that they to may receive a heavenly future.

The purpose of our earthly life is then often seen as ensuring that we don't do anything to disqualify ourselves from such a future. So much emphasis is placed upon personal morality and ethics. Do these things - don't do those things - and you will be ok...

At its worst this conviction often dismisses the material. As one celebrity pastor put it, if Jesus is going to come again to wipe away everything then what does it matter if I drive a gas-guzzling SUV?

2. This text must be seen against the background of 1st century wedding practices. To help you work through subsequent questions what details of this background stood out to you in the sermon? Where do you see this imagery show up in other places in the new testament?

Here is an unedited portion of the sermon on this front. There are far more linkages to this imagery than I mentioned in the sermon particularly in the parables of Jesus so my list is in no way exhaustive.

Jesus is using imagery that his disciples were very familiar with - imagery from - of all places - 1st century Jewish wedding practices - in the 1st century Jewish weddings were the fruit of arranged marriages - each set of parents would seek to find the best match for their son or daughter - the arrangement would be finalized when the father's would meet to determine a bride price - dowry - a number of

cows, an amount of oil or wine, a piece of land - but the engagement could not be sealed until the groom took a glass of wine to his potential future bride and said "by offering you this cup, I vow that I'm willing to give my life for you" - by drinking from the cup the future bride was sealing the engagement - symbolizing that she in turn was giving her life to him

Now unlike modern weddings where very soon after the engagement a date is set - invitations sent out - and a furious marathon of activity ensues to pull all the details together for the celebration - in the 1st century no one had any idea as to when the wedding would start - there would often be a long delay.

Why? Well the groom would have to go back to his father's house - saying to his future bride - I am going home to prepare a place for you - and returning home he'd begin to build an addition - a room - onto the family home - where they would live after the wedding - and only when it was completed - and permission from his father given - could he return, and the wedding festivities begin.

The bride then would have to be in a constant state of readiness - her whole life would revolve around being ready - for she would not know the time, the date, the hour of his return - the only warning she would get would be the friend of the groom sent ahead to blow the trumpet moments before the groom arrived.

This imagery is all throughout the new testament - Jesus will say here to his followers - I am going away to prepare a place for you - in my father's house are many rooms - I'm going to return and take you to myself - In that last supper - where this conversation takes place - Jesus offers them his life with a cup of wine - this is my life given for you - in Matthew 24 he says - no one knows the time - date - or hour - of my return only my father - of course he knows the date time and hour of his return - he's God - but these are words that locate our understanding of the end in this imagery - in 1 Cor 6 Paul will say of followers of Jesus - we have been bought with a price - the bride price has been paid - the very life of the son given for you - in 1 Thess 4 Paul will say - Jesus' return will be announced with the sound of a trumpet - in our Revelation 19 reading - his return will inaugurate an eternal wedding feast - all of this imagery utilized to tell us something about our future - the end that is meant to animate our life as church.

Read Matthew 26: 26-29

3. How does seeing the Lord's supper in the context of this imagery change your understanding of it? Its purpose in our worship and life as church?

There is a whole lot going on in the Lord's Supper but one of the elements behind it is Jesus offering his life to us in the cup of wine. Will you join your life to mine? Will you join me in my future? By receiving the cup we are accepting his proposal - aligning our lives to him - aligning our future to his.

Like the bride there is a commitment to wait actively for his return – to orient our entire life toward that future. To be ready, for his return could happen at any time.

Read Revelation 21:1-5a

4. What is the future that Jesus is preparing for us? (The many rooms in his Father's house)

Here is an unedited piece from the sermon that should help with this question:

The marriage imagery tells us that this future is relational – it's about love – our future is about entering more and more fully into the love that God has for us in Jesus – being caught up in the eternal loving relationship between God Father, Son and Spirit – what we now know dimly – incompletely – we will know fully – completely

The imagery also tells us that this future is one of joy beyond measure - you see a wedding feast was the most joyous occasion in a typical Jewish town – everyone was invited – it lasted a week – a week of feasting – rich succulent foods – incredible finely aged wine – Jesus is saying that our greatest earthly joys are but a pale foretaste of the future joy he's preparing for us.

The imagery tells us that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare this future for us – and what does that future look like - well our revelation 21 reading fills in some details - and I saw a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven adorned as a bride for her husband – this is the future home Jesus has gone ahead to prepare for us – a future of no more pain – no more sorrow – no more disease – a future where all wrongs will be righted – all pains washed away – all evil undone – our world shot through with his goodness - justice - beauty - peace - and this is not a heavenly – ethereal – spiritual future – heavenly mansions and streets of gold – this is an earthly – material – physical future – a future where there is flourishing in every aspect of life - and when the trumpet sounds – Jesus will return to bring that future into reality.

Read Revelation 19:6-9a “How do we live in light of this future”

5. What is the place of righteousness / justice, evangelism, and hope in light of this future?

Here is an unedited piece from the sermon that should help with this question:

When the follower of Jesus looks out at the sin – brokenness – injustice of our world – we grieve – we wail – we cry out – this is not as it should be – this is not as God intended – that grief – that lament – is right – is good – it has its place – but oriented toward this future – we must also say – this is not the way it will be – adding to our grief a yearning – a godly desire for that future to come into the present – and when we yearn for something – it orients our faculties – our

resources toward it – turns our time – energy – money – talents toward those ends – leading us to live in anticipation of this future.

The imagery supports this – the first century Jewish bride was to be in a constant state of readiness – dressed for the occasion – Revelation 19 picks up this imagery – inviting us to be ready for his return – adorned in our wedding garments – fine linen – bright and pure – the text explains – this is the adornment of righteous deeds...

If you are more right leaning in your Christian sensibilities, you may be thinking – well this is an invitation to obedience – to live faithfully in step with the commands of God – a life of integrity with my words – my money – my body – and I think the scriptures would say to you yes – clothe yourselves with such things...

If you are more left leaning in your Christian sensibilities, you may be thinking – this is an invitation to press into matters of justice – to ensure that the conditions are present in our world where all are able to flourish – and I think the scriptures would say to you yes – clothe yourselves with such things...

Righteousness is both a life of personal obedience – and a commitment to kingdom justice – for the future we're oriented toward is one where we will personally be made new – and our world will be made new – let us not separate what the scriptures hold together – clothe yourselves with such things...

Not only does this future place justice – righteousness in its proper place – it puts evangelism in its proper place...

In light of a spiritual – ethereal – heavenly future – heavenly mansions and streets of gold – evangelism often sounds like the sales pitch for a divine insurance policy – come to Jesus – secure your spot in an afterlife.

But in light of this imagery – evangelism becomes invitation – as revelation 19 puts it – blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the lamb – an invitation to a future yes – but also an invitation to a life lived in light of that future – by Jesus' death and resurrection that future has come into the present – by the work of the Spirit that future begins to take shape in us – transforming us – by the work of the Spirit we are drawn into the life of a community – the church – committed to anticipating that future together in all we do and say and pray.

Harvie Conn has a great analogy for this – he calls the church a model home. We are to be God's demonstration community of his rule. On a tract of earth's land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the entire urban landscape. He now invites the world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying 'Come in and look around' – in this model home we live out our new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come – and that is why this movement toward kingdom justice is so important for our life together –

as church we are meant to demonstrate the fullness of what that future will look like.

As we actively wait for that future to come in its fullness – it is a waiting that is infused with hope – for like the bride we don't know when the trumpet will sound – but are assured it will – for it is rooted in the faithful promises of God.

What our world desperately needs is a people infused with such hope – for there's not a whole lot of hope for the future of our world is there? – war – disease – famine – economic uncertainty – climate change – deepening divisions – hatred and anger broiling – all this and more contributing to an erosion of hope – the fracturing of our humanity – our communities – we need hope

In his book Man's search for meaning – Viktor Frankl – a Jewish psychotherapist – reflected on hope in light of his time imprisoned in Auschwitz during WWII.

in the midst of the hopelessness of camp life – some he said became brutal and cruel – thinking only of their own survival – they colluded with the Nazi guards – betrayed their fellow prisoners for scraps.

Others gave up hope entirely – just didn't get up one day – stopped eating

Still others grabbed a hold of a temporal hope – if only I could survive the war – I'll return to what I once had – health – family – wealth – position – the camps were liberated and those things were not restored – and Frankl observed – their lives after liberation were marked with ongoing despair.

But there was another – small yet significant group – who in the midst of the brutality and hopelessness of camp life remained kind – possessed inner freedom – inner strength – and it all had to do – as Frankl observed – with the possession of a hope that was rooted not in temporal realities but eternal ones.

The faithful one – Jesus – proclaims – behold I am making all things new – I am preparing for you a glorious future – and at the end – at the trumpet blast – will come again to bring it to completion – such a promise gives us a hope not rooted in temporal realities – not rooted in human progression or ingenuity – but a hope rooted in the loving faithfulness of God.