

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
3 November 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost / All Saints' Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Generous Memories, Generous Dreams”

Second Sermon in the Stewardship Series, *Giving for Goodness*
Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Revelation 21:1-6a

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Those who interpret the words and images in the book of Revelation literally often read it as a scary prediction of “end times” with a gruesome holy war, where some (‘true believers’) will be rescued up to Jesus and others will be “left behind. This reading tends to wield scripture like a weapon igniting fear. Yet when we understand the *dream* which is John’s revelation, we find instead: inspiration.

At its heart, Revelation is a book of consolation and comfort for a people who are *already* at war, suffering under the occupying power of Rome and Emperor Diocletian.

Revelation is a vision, a dream, of John, the beloved disciple of Jesus. The *only* disciple, I will remind you, that was not executed or killed as a martyr; the *only* disciple who lived into old age. However, before we

celebrate the fact that he lived decades longer than his contemporaries, let’s just sit with the fact that he is writing Revelation from the Island of Patmos.

John was exiled to this island during this time of severe persecution. Even though it failed in its purpose to eliminate Christianity out of the Roman Empire entirely, the Diocletianic Persecution from 303-312 was the empire's largest and bloodiest official, state-sanctioned persecution of Christianity.

So we must remember that it is in this context that John writes this letter to comfort seven churches who were undergoing this horror as well, urging them to remain steadfast in their faith, and assuring them that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the Roman Empire’s power is

not absolute; it is God who reigns supreme.¹

Revelation is in the genre called apocalyptic literature. This type of writing is about revealing (*revelation*) or ‘lifting the veil’ on what is happening here and now, *not* predicting the future. Which means it should not be read in a temporal sense of what events will happen in a certain number of years at some so called “end times”—lest this letter be misunderstood and misused—but is to be read, rather, in a spiritual and self-reflective sense about our destiny: “*Where are we going? Where are we headed? What is the purpose of life?*”²

In the same way that Genesis is an *etiology*—an *origin* story to help us understand where we came from and why we are here, Revelation is an *eschatology*—a *destination* story to help us understand where we are going.³ Revelation is no more a prediction of literal future events than Genesis is a scientific or evolutionary or historical account of human

beginnings. They are about the *truth* of human experience, not the facts.

And the answer to both questions—where we are *from* and where we are *headed*—is the same. From St. Augustine in the fourth century who said “all things come forth from God and all things ultimately return to God”⁴—to twentieth century poet T.S. Eliot who wrote, “In my end is my beginning...”⁵—to Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber in contemporary times who said from this very pulpit at David and Sherry Peterson’s daughter Lauren’s memorial service in 2016: “*God is both our origin and our destination*”—the overall message of the book of Revelation is to assure of what is trustworthy and true: that God is “*the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,*” (Revelation 21:6a).

“*See, I am making all things new,*” (Rev. 21:5) John writes. This is the good news of the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21. (And Jerusalem here is not

¹ Ginger Grab, “Revelation 21:1-6a: Homiletical Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 231.

² David S. Cunningham, “Revelation 21:1-6a: Theological Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word:*

Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 232.

³ Cunningham, 230.

⁴ Cunningham, 232, quoting Augustine’s *Confessions*.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), 32.

referencing the real city of Jerusalem today, by the way.) God and human beings dwell together in new community and new commitment or covenant, just as they did at the beginning in the origin story of the Garden of Eden. John uses the same imagery in his dream. If you were to keep reading into chapter 22, you'd see that the description of the "new city" coming down includes a garden with the Tree of Life being endlessly fruitful, with leaves that provide for "the healing of [all] the nations" (Rev. 22:2).

And as we see in today's excerpt from chapter 21, the "sea" is no more. In Jewish apocalyptic literature, the sea is a representation of chaos, the evil powers that disrupt God's intentions for the world. So in the new creation, there is no space for such chaos or confusion or evil.⁶

Isn't that a good word for us today on the eve of election week? God's dream for us is not to churn in chaos, but to thrive in communion with *all*.

Likewise, "the new Jerusalem" is a metaphor or reference to the

realized dream of this idealized community, the kin-dom of God finally being here on earth as it is in heaven. Scholars tell us that the language "echoes the propaganda language of the cities of Rome and Babylon, which promoted themselves as the 'ideal cities.' While these cities promoted injustice, exploitation, and idolatry, the new Jerusalem promotes the continuous presence of God among God's people."⁷

That's it! That's the dream! That we might realize that God dwells in ALL people; the *imago dei*, the image of God is always with us and within us, and if we truly understood God is within all people we would not kill, harm, marginalize, enslave, exclude, starve, threaten, (fill in the blank) *anyone*.

The dream is simply to acknowledge and honor and celebrate the dignity and belovedness of *each* person, which includes people from every "tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).⁸ God's dream for God's people does not include walls or borders or gerrymandering electoral districts. God's dream

⁶ David Cortés-Fuentes, "Revelation 21:1-6a: Exegetical Perspective," eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised*

Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 233.

⁷ Cortés-Fuentes, 233.

⁸ Cortés-Fuentes, 235.

for us, as God's people, is to live together, to care for one another, so that pain and suffering are no more. When John writes, "*God will wipe away every tear,*" he's echoing the prophetic words of Isaiah 25:8 that God "*will swallow up death forever;*" he's insisting that God's presence with God's people means that all people have well-being or welfare, not warfare.⁹

Biblical scholar David Cortés-Fuentes says it this way: "*The creation of a new community in communion with God is not the result of history but the purpose of history.*"¹⁰ Our purpose is always and forever to be returning to God's love and to allow God's love to be actualized in every corner and crevice of our lives, our country, and our world...in our policies and our programs...in how we dignify every Body and disrupt every inequity. We are created for expansive community—with Creation, with other, with self. We are created to be Thriving in Goodness for Good. Our understanding of our goodness comes from God saying 'we are good' in Genesis, our origin story of beginnings—and—we will know we are at our

destination story, when we are co-creators of enough Good in the world that "mourning and crying and pain are no more" and that God's kin-dom of love has come for *GOOD*—that is, *forever!*

This is not a pipe dream or a Pollyanna vision. John *knows* what trauma and persecution are. He and his people are living it. And—*they* are not retaliating with force. Rather, they are speaking visions and dreams into existence to remind the people—*all* people—that a different reality other than what they are experiencing here and now IS possible.

We actually do not know a lot of details about *how* these early persecuted Christians escaped and survived to tell their story to us today but what we do know is *Why* they survived. Revelation gives us a glimpse of how they imagined their freedom, how they dreamed their liberation. They folks were Jews who had become Christians in a Roman world, making them members of a heretical wing of a minority faith barely tolerated by a brutal empire. Yet what they saw and preached was a vision of

⁹ Cortés-Fuentes, 235.

¹⁰ Cortés-Fuentes, 235.

universal humanity, a new heaven and a new earth, a holy city coming down from heaven, prepared—in that powerful metaphor of marrying things heavenly and earthly—as a bride adorned for her husband. What is a wedding but a new partnership, a new beginning, a new creation? “*And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See I am making all things new...’*” No wonder they wrote all these things down, for in a world of shifting values and imperial terror, and falsehoods stated as facts, they knew that these visionary words of consolation and promise were “trustworthy and true,”¹¹ more so than what they were seeing and experiencing before them in the moment.

This is not unlike what we see in the history of our own country in the imaginations of enslaved Africans. As author of *We are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*, Eddie Glaude Jr, writes: “African American slaves found themselves locked in a brutal relation of domination, [yet] their relationship to God enabled them to see, as the

scholar Charles Long noted, beyond the opacity of their own condition: **they imagined the possible as they endured the absurdity of the actual.** [*I’m going to repeat that sentence again; we may need it this week!*] They held at arm’s length the reality of social death by living in relation to God and with others who suffered, relations that aren’t reducible to the brutality of the slave regime even as they are constrained by them. Religious imagination occasions, then, the possibility of what Robin Kelley so brilliantly calls ‘freedom dreams,’ Black utopian imaginings that characterize so much of African American strivings”¹² and survival. Without the dreams they held, would there have been descendants to follow?

Like freedom dreams, John’s vision—his *dream*—lifts him out of everyday life to a heavenly realm where he can view earthly existence from God’s perspective. And we who read John’s visions must also allow ourselves to be transported¹³ into the dream that God is placing before us. Not a

¹¹ Rober A. Ferlo, “Revelation 21:1-6a: Pastoral Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 234.

¹² Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *We are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 2024, 39.

¹³ Grab, 231, 233.

dream for the Here After; a
dream for the Here and Now.

Dreaming can transform our own understanding of reality, particularly when we are suffering. Dreaming can give us the imagination that there is a different way, a hope-filled way, of living in this world. Just as Revelation was a word of comfort and hope in the present, and not a prediction about the future, so too, can our dreams propel us into comfort and hope for the future, not because we are naïve, but because we are creative and resilient and understand the Truth for which we were created—community and communion with and for God and others. *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* How many times will we pray these words before we understand what we are really praying?

We are praying the dream! And as we pray these words, week after week, we must embody them too: in how we vote, how we create policies, how we live out our mission at Calvary, and how we steward our resources. Because dreams become reality when they are fueled by discernment and funded by

dollars, generation after generation through the continuum of time.

John of Patmos’ vision is appropriate for today, All Saints’ Day because we’re viewing existence from the perspective of eternity. We honor these saints who have come before us, whose examples we wish to follow, and the saints who will come after us. We acknowledge that we, too, are saints here and now and belong to the communion of saints—past, present, future.¹⁴

What will our legacy be?

As author of *We are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*, Eddie Glaude Jr, writes: *“We cannot be concerned solely with the future as if the past is not present in our current living. If we do, hubris will hollow out our dreams. Any struggle for the world as it could be must be imagined close to the ground in the world as it is and as it came to be.”*¹⁵

We **Remember** *What Has Been* as a foundation to **Dream** of *What Will Be*.

¹⁴ Grab, 235.

¹⁵ Glaude, Jr., 12

Calvary, in this season of Stewardship, of Giving for Goodness, we remember our beloved saints, as the generosity of their lives gives us generous memories that can never be extinguished. These memories live on, not just for these families, but as the very DNA of who we are—as the unique Body of Christ that is Calvary Baptist Church of Denver.

The generous memories we hold of **Mary Jane Bessey** include:

- how she spiced up the world with her beautiful music—
- how she “lit up the room” with her dancing
- how she freely shared her laughter, her gossip, her friendships, her feistiness, and her love and commitment to family.

The generous memories we hold of **Kenneth Smith** include:

- how he had an infectious laugh with a glimmer in his eye;
- how he was kind to everyone—a gentle Giant who enjoyed the little things like talking to neighbors as he took out the trash or making his iced tea for those who stopped by;

- and how he found his true purpose and calling as a caregiver—patiently and attentively caring for both his mom and dad until they died.

The generous memories we hold of **Carol Dávila** include:

- how she loved cooking and catering and providing hospitality to many;
- how she expressed her creativity through collections and gardening, embroidery and ceramics;
- how she LOVED to travel, visiting 92 countries and 27 states with her beloved, Lawrence;
- how she took delight in teaching, putting innovative thought into lesson plans and classroom decorations;
- and how her generosity “had no bounds” as Larry described.

The generous memories we hold of **Al Dube** include:

- his “jack of all trades” handyman qualities—“*if Papa can’t fix it nobody can!*”;
- and his service to our country in the Navy, serving as a Seabee.

He was one of the first ones to head to Vietnam; he and his

batallian built the barracks and runways for others to come and serve there. He built a *lasting structure* for all who would come behind him. A trend he would continue throughout his life—from building the home that he and Sherry and their kids lived in—to re-building and renovating *every* part of the home he shared with Patty here in Denver—to building a fireplace for Shannon and a tire swing for Janaya.

The generous memories we hold of **Cory Crile** include:

- how he courageously lived with major depression and severe epilepsy for much longer than those closest to him thought he would (or could);
- how he created authentic, inclusive space for others to be themselves, and how he found that space for himself in online gaming communities;
- how he was an amazing hands-on dad to Lucy and Carly, and a supportive husband who was cheerleader for Emily's accomplishments in music and directing
- how he always lit up a room with his humor, sarcasm, or tidbit of

random information that you never knew you needed to know and probably could have never known and made it through life just fine yet now you are all the wiser because Cory just couldn't resist sharing his curiosity and passion;

- how he always wanted to help out and had a true servant heart, which we certainly experienced here at Calvary—through the livestream ministry and all the property projects he helped out with, always with a smile on his face and colorful Converse sneakers on his feet. These hallways echo with his voice: "*Do you need anything?...Can I help?*"

The generous memories we hold of **Marva Boyer** include

- her devoted love to family as a daughter, wife, sister, and aunt;
- her kindness and generosity, always eager to find the perfect gift for that perfect someone
- her love of traveling and collecting Christmas ornaments, sending cards and postcards and journaling along the way

- her 33 years of teaching—a life truly dedicated to educating young kindergarten and first grade minds here in Denver

The generous memories we hold of **Wayne Eldon Hamilton** include:

- how he loved all things mechanical and figuring out how things worked—from alarm clocks to car engines
- how he found such joy in tinkering around: building things, fixing things, taking things apart and putting them back together; organizing things—always some kind of method to his madness! (even if he was the only one who knew it!)
- how he was unwavering in his devotion to his clients and customers when he worked for the National Cash Register Company—traveling all over and working long hours to ensure things were working right
- how he loved music, blasting organ music throughout the house and humming the bass line to his favorite hymns
- how he loved road trips and spending time in the car
- how he loved his wife, his sons, and his grandkids—and even his neighbors, doing

little things like pulling in their trash cans “just because”

You each have your own generous memories of those you are remembering today. Whatever is that you love about them and remember about them—even painful memories or the things that you struggled with them about—these memories are inexplicably connected to who you are today.

The spiritual practice of **Remembering** connects to where we have come from and who has brought us to where we are today. Likewise, the spiritual practice of **Dreaming** connects where we are today, to where we are going tomorrow. Etiologies and Eschatologies: Origin Stories and Destination Stories.

As Eddie Glaude, Jr. challenges us all to be heroic leaders (or saints!) in our time, he says: “Reflecting on the now does not imply relinquishing the future or forgetting the past: the present is the meeting place for the three directions of time. It is here, right here, where the depth of our past informs heroic efforts by the most unlikely of persons [today allows us] to speak

prophetically”¹⁶ to our future dreams.

“We are the prophets we have been looking for. No more waiting for rainbow signs [from above or someone else to emerge as a hero or a saint]. Our [dreams] can point the way toward a better world.”¹⁷

A tendency on All Saints’ Day is to honor those who have come before and think of their sacrifices and efforts as beyond what we will ever do. But the opposite is true. What they did mattered. It got us to today. But now, what we do matters even more because there is no one else to get us to tomorrow. It’s you and me.

Brian McLaren, leader among the emerging church movement and author of *Life after Doom* observes: “*Religion has been so focused on our ancestors. But when we devote ourselves more to our ancestors than our descendants, we miss the chance to take the faith we inherit and improve it and pass it on to our descendants*”¹⁸ who carry God’s dream forward.

Civil Rights movement hero, Ella Baker called this an *Ethical Ought*.¹⁹ Meaning, the struggle and sacrifices of our ancestors require of those of us who are their immediate beneficiaries to make a commitment to ensuring a society where all in the future can flourish too.

This is why Baker resisted efforts to absorb new, young student movement into older, established civil rights organizations. She insisted on the space of the young people of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) to find their own voices and to make their own unique contributions in this tradition of struggle. She emphasized a knowledge of a citation of the past, but not a nostalgic longing for origins, or else, this younger generation would be constrained and would not feel the space and creativity they needed to give shape and contour to their imaginings,”²⁰ to their dreams—with their gifts, their voices—not just for themselves but for the collective good!

Calvary—we have been given generous memories by these,

¹⁶ Glaude, Jr., 78.

¹⁷ Glaude, Jr., 26.

¹⁸ Quote from Rev. Andrew Daugherty’s Enews reflection on McLaren’s weekend with his congregation at Pine Street Church in Boulder, CO in October 2024.

¹⁹ Glaude, Jr., 90.

²⁰ Glaude, Jr., 90.

our Saints. It is now our turn to create—and fund—generous dreams for our future. Dreams that realize the ‘new heaven and earth,’ the reality of God’s presence dwelling with God’s people—a community where death and suffering is no more—a community where justice, equity, peace, inclusivity, belonging, and grace reign. A community that situates us—Calvary Baptist Church of Denver—right in the middle of the continuum: Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, held in God’s embrace and at the same time an agent of God’s transformation, grace, and love in the world.

Deep breaths.

In a few days, we’ll know who the leader of our country will be for the next four years.

Remember this though: we already know who the leader of our community is for all time—the Ever-Creating and Everlasting God, Redeeming Christ, Love Incarnate, and Ever-present, always provoking Spirit. Alpha and Omega, beginning and end...and You and I are in the Meaningful Middle. We are the bridge between the Generous Memories of our Past and the

Generous Dreams of God’s Future.

May we join God in making “all things new” for all people. May we, in this Meaningful Middle Moment, be memory keepers and dream makers.

Amen.