

God's Ministry of Change
Revelation 21:1-5a

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May 2, 2021

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Rev. 21:5a

Someone has called change "our dear enemy."¹

Change is an enemy we approach with apprehension because it takes away much that we love. A character in a novel stood looking at what was going on around her one day and it was as if she could see time seeping out of the scene in a slow leak.²

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.³

Change is our enemy because of what speeds away with it.

And change is dear because of what it brings. It is a dear enemy. Dear because who would want a changeless life, a life in a constant freeze-frame? That kind of life soon would be stagnant and stale, drab and dull. Change is dear to us because of the newness it brings.

Whether change is mourned or welcomed, it is inevitable. Heraclitus, one of the earliest philosophers on record, declared that everything is in flux; life is like a flame of fire that is never still. Heraclitus is remembered as pointing out that you cannot put your foot in the same river twice, for the current is always moving and the river never stays the same.⁴

Robert Frost has an eight-line poem the last line of which says, "Nothing gold can stay."⁵ He means by that that even the purest and most wonderful beauties and joys of life are like the plants that bud, then flower, and then fade. "Nothing gold can stay."

A passage from the Book of Revelation can help us to think about this dear enemy of ours called change. It can especially help us come to terms with change as a work of God among us. The passage, from the beginning of chapter 21, opens in prose and quickly moves to poetry; it begins with a vision that yields to a voice. It opens with human eyes seeing a confusing sight and closes with the divine voice giving an explaining word.

The vision in prose

The prose tells of the human experience of change. The author of Revelation reports seeing difference happening all around him. The changes he sees are massive. They can even be called astronomical.

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Hope of the World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), p. 108.

² Alice McDermott, *At Weddings and Wakes* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1992), p. 3.

³ Henry F. Lyte, "Abide with Me," *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), #99.

⁴ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Part 1 (Garden City: Image Books, 1962), p. 55.

⁵ *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1975), p.222-223.

What does he see changing? Everything! There is a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, and a lost sea. Everything that he once knew has changed from what it was. The stars above him are different. The ground beneath him is different. The sea around him is altogether missing. (I'll come back to the sea shortly.) And the whole apparatus of his religion has been pulled away so that the old faith-practices that once helped him to make sense of life are no longer what they were. It is as if the writer does not know where he is anymore. There is a new heaven, a new earth, a vanished sea, and a new Jerusalem. Nothing is familiar.

Pictorial language that, but it is something we see vividly every day of our lives. What now is as it was of old? Not much. Work is different than it was. School is different than it was. Church is different than it was. Society is different than it was. Today clearly is not yesterday. What we once knew has leaked out of the scene and what is left in its place is unfamiliar.

The voice that speaks in poetry

The voice speaks from the throne. You will remember, I hope, that *throne* is one of the key words in the Book of Revelation. It is introduced in chapter four where it is described as the throne of God. There is goodness and glory all around it. There is majesty and power and wonder and beauty. This voice that comes from the throne is the voice of God – the voice of unchallenged and unchallengeable authority.

The voice that speaks from the throne reveals God's identity. The writer, with his human eyes, is seeing that everything around him has changed; the voice, with its divine revelation, declares that God is the agent of change. It is God who says, "I am making all things new." Now – listen to me carefully – I do not mean to suggest that God is the cause of every change around us, but we are called to suppose God is the cause of some of the change around us. Someone wisely said that if we are seeing the whitecaps of rough water around us we should not rule out the possibility that the winds of change causing those whitecaps come from the Spirit of God hovering over us about to do a new thing.⁶ In any case, here in the Book of Revelation, the voice of authority that speaks from the throne of God identifies God as the agent of change. "I am making all things new."

The voice that reveals God's identity also reveals God's purpose behind the changes God is introducing. There are three purposes of God revealed in this text.

The first purpose is that God wants to dwell with human beings.

See, the home of God is among mortals,

He will dwell with them

Let your mind page back in the Bible to the Book of Exodus, the third chapter. That is where God speaks to Moses out of that burning bush. That word then is that God has come down from heaven to be with the Hebrew people in their trouble and to lead them out of slavery. Now God is making it so there will no longer be a need for God to *come down* to the human plane for from now on God will *dwell with* human beings on the human level. God will be in our midst always. The God who came to the Hebrews at the time of the exodus, the God who came to earth in Jesus

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 153.

to reveal and to reconcile, is making the presence permanent. God changes things in order to dwell with us more fully.

The second purpose I see in the text is that God wants to re-establish the covenant between God and human beings.

He will be with them as their God;
they will be his peoples

That is covenant language straight from the Old Testament. Covenant is the promise-filled relationship God wants to have with people. Covenant is God's pledge of fidelity toward us and God's call for fidelity from us. At various points in the Old Testament there is the Voice of God setting the terms of the covenant in this language:

I will be your God
and you will be my people.⁷

The covenant was broken through human rebellion from God. Through Jesus Christ God rebuilt and repaired the broken covenant. That is what is reiterated here in Revelation. God works change in order to restore the broken covenant: I will be yours in fidelity, God says, and you will be mine.

So there are the first two purposes for the changes God is making: the purpose to dwell more fully with us and the purpose to reestablish the bonds of covenant fidelity. The third purpose is to enable us to live in perfect peace without threat. God

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.

That is why the reference to the sea is the way it is in verse one. Notice in verse one that there is a new heaven and a new earth, but not a new sea. Heaven and earth are both replaced. The sea is not replaced. It is taken away. To get to the significance of that, let your mind page back in the Bible to Genesis chapter one. Genesis opens with a mysterious all-comprehensive expanse of water – nothing but unsettled waves, no solid ground for any kind of footing whatsoever. That expanse of sea is chaos with all its uncertainty and unpredictability and threat. In the first creation, God *separated* those waters and caused dry land to appear. The waters chaos remained on the margins – not gone but still a present and lurking threat. Now in the new creation described in Revelation, the sea is gone! The threat is eliminated! With nothing to threaten, death and mourning and crying and pain are gone. Life can be lived in perfect peace.

There are three wonderful purposes that God as the agent of change is working to bring about – the purpose of dwelling with us, re-establishing the covenant with us, and eradicating every threat to our happiness. But let us be sure to see that this voice from the throne that reveals God's identity and purpose withholds God's timetable. "See, I am making all things new." Mark the tense of the verb. The action of the verb is not completed. It is happening but it is not completed. The changes God is working are all for our good, but they are en route and not altogether in effect.

⁷ Cf. for example Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; Jer. 30:22; Ezek. 36:28.

Perhaps you saw in last week's *Capital Times* the interview with Madison novelist Ann Garvin who said human life is messy and life is a matter of coming to terms with the messiness.⁸ Simple messiness, though, is lingering chaos; the transformation Revelation reveals is not simple messiness but unfinished progress on its way to completion. It is the voice of authority who says, "I am making all things new." God isn't done yet but the completion to perfection is assured.

Gathering up what we have said, we have this on the basis of our passage for today. God's ministry of change among us is such that nothing is off the table as far as what can be changed is concerned – heaven can be changed, earth can be changed, the apparatus of religion can be changed – nothing is off the table where the hand of God is involved. There are changes that occur that are not of God, but God is the one authoritative agent of change and God's authoritative intent is altogether our good. God is not absent but present, showing fidelity to you in the midst of change, and working undisappointing change for the sake of your well-being.

⁸ Rob Thomas, "Q&A: Author Ann Garvin says 'being human is a mess,' and that's just fine," *The Capital Times*, April 25, 2021. https://madison.com/ct/ct/writers/rob-thomas/q-a-author-ann-garvin-says-being-human-is-a-mess-and-thats-just-fine/article_86c64dfb-024c-5749-bble-9750c96d35fe.html. Accessed April 26, 2021.