

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

■ Revelation 21:1

A family of five is on the road trip of a lifetime. They play “*I Spy With My Little Eye*” and the “*Geography*” game and they sing church songs the kids learned in Sunday School. They barely have time to see the other car careening across the centre lane of the highway, killing all except the youngest, who’s left wheelchair-bound for life.

A ten year-old girl knows this plot of land well. It’s been in her family for four generations, and every day after school, she takes off her shoes and wades in the rice paddies beside her mother. It isn’t the season for typhoons, but the hot, humid air has a way of pulling the worst storms in. She tells herself to be brave as the family shuts the door against the sideways-falling rain to huddle over the cow dung fire. After all, she’s not new to typhoons, and she goes to sleep that night with the sound of thunder rattling her ears. It’s a small mercy, but she dies instantly when a ten-foot high wall of mud crashes down on the family home.

A young lawyer in a large downtown firm has headaches. At first, he thinks it’s just the nature of his job, but when the headaches get worse and his arms tingle when he’s tired, he begins to realize it’s not just stress. He goes to the doctor expecting to get a prescription for some blood tests and a round of antibiotics, but days later, he finds himself with his head in an MRI bore. The lawyer didn’t know what a glioma was until that afternoon. He does now.

No matter where we live, how hard we work, or how carefully we plan our lives, none of us can guard against random evil. We insure and indemnify, but the fact that random evil *does* happen is why we buy insurance in the first place. In some ways, it's easier to deal with personified evil like a genocidal warmongering dictator. *Him* we can fight with. *Him* we can stone and slander and sincerely hope he burns for what he does. Anything, we think, to keep us from acknowledging the taint of imperfection in our own hearts. Anything, we hope, to keep us from the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. A serial killer we can spit on is easier to square with our hope that God is really good in spite of the chosen evil of a few. It's the indiscriminate evil, the rotten flukes of life that we don't know what to do with. Yet one of the foundations of hope as a follower of Jesus is the hope that with a new Heaven and a new Earth, *there will be no sea*.

We've reached the end of the Revelation of Jesus to John, the disciple left to bleach and rot on the rocks of the prison island Patmos. We've endured long passages of trumpets and bowls and beasts. We've walked through pages of burning rivers and mysterious forehead marks. And if you've been following along in the lectionary, we've also seen death itself thrown down from its perch as that which rules and regulates our lives. Now, we come to a scrap of a verse that passes under almost all our radars. Most of us won't even notice it because we're too busy imagining what the new heaven and new earth will look like. The words "*and there was no sea*" never seem to make it to the top of our lists about things we hope will happen in the next life. In fact, a few of us might even think the new earth's a dump because there is no sea—and therefore, no

beaches, no sailing, no fishing, and definitely no lying in the sun with fruity drink in hand. Yet here, in the second-last chapter of Revelation, just as everything that's been bad finally gets put to rights and just before God himself wipes away every tear we have ever shed, here we have this little particle: *there was no sea*.

It helps to understand what the first century listeners were hearing when John describes this lack of a sea. Even though I grew up thrashing around in swimming pools, they were likely feeling what I feel whenever I swim in a lake—dread. Fear. Panic. Seventy percent of the earth's surface is covered with water, and most of it is cold, dark, and very mysterious. When Revelation was written, being a sailor was one of the most hazardous occupations you could have because the fickleness of the sea and the weather upon it was something to be feared, not powered through like we do in our modern-day supertankers. To the ancients—and especially to the mostly landlocked Israelites-- the sea was representative of chaos, of the unknown. We see this in the Bible when authors used water as a symbol of meaningless terror. God hovers over the *tohu wabohu*, the deeps and waters of the shapeless nothingness. From the safety of his cypresswood boat, Noah stares out at the waters unmaking everything that was made—except him, his family, and a few close friends. In the biggest big fish story of all time, Jonah runs from God's call and throws himself down into the deepest sea, seeking oblivion.

As an agrarian society, Israel knew too well what it meant to be on the receiving end of random evil like drought or plague. Living just above subsistence level as most of the world did at that time meant that they didn't have much insurance when it came to

natural disasters, never mind government-run welfare programs to help the sick and old. If we have reason to fear the turbulent waters of chaos, Israel had even more. It's no wonder that the first foreign gods Israel bowed down to were fertility gods—who better to pay obeisance to than the things they thought could control the weather and thus their food? Everything depended on things going just right. There is no margin for error in the life of a subsistence farmer.

Yet something changes when Jesus appears in the grand narrative. He tells the storm to shut up. He stands on top of the waves and tells Peter to join him there. For the people who know John's gospel and now were hearing John's vision, these weren't just neat Bible stories. These were the stories of someone who looked like a man but acted like a god; someone who displayed lordship over the very forces of chaos themselves. When the disciples huddled in the boat and asked each other "who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!"¹ they weren't wondering who Jesus is as though the man they were following suddenly became a stranger. What they meant when they asked "who is this" was "what stuff is this man made of? He can't possibly be human, because only God controls the elements the way this man does."

The book we have been walking through together has been a broad tableau of struggle and symbolism that can leave our heads spinning. But it would not be an overstatement to say that everything in the Bible leads up to this simple confession: *and there was no longer any sea*, for the sea itself is redeemed and repurposed. In

¹ Luke 8:25

Revelation 1, the voice of the one who looks like a man is the sound of rushing waters—God channels and speaks through the chaotic mess. In Revelation 4, the sea has turned to glass, a symbol of perfect understanding and peace. Now, in Revelation 21, gone are the cruel waters that unmake the world. Gone are the unpredictable vicissitudes of life. In their places instead is a New Heaven and New Earth, the kind we all dream about or see on television during commercials touting early retirement.

Yet is that really all we'll see of the New Heaven and New Earth on this side of death? Cynics would call this a "pie in the sky" moment because we appear to be longing for something that will forever be beyond our reach. But is this really the case? It's easy to be discouraged by the way the world seems to go from chaos to chaos, but if we say that with Jesus, the Kingdom has arrived (but not yet in fullness), then we also can affirm that even now, under our very noses, the darkness is being dried up.

I biked home from UBC the other day. Summer was finally in full swing and there are few better things than to flit through the shadows of the alder and maple that line Point Grey roads. Living in Vancouver, we know that not every day will be as clear and bright as that one was, but if you're expecting me to say that the weather will only get better as the Kingdom of God slowly becomes the only reality, you're going to be disappointed. Instead, we need to look elsewhere for the calming of the sea.

So here's where I see it: I see it all around us, and I see it in you. I see the ways cold hearts are getting warmed and I think "*the Holy Spirit is changing that person's heart*", a thing that no one else can do. I see Westerners becoming more and more aware of how our overconsumption has hurt the rest of the world, and in the way we

turn from it, I see the justice of the Kingdom of God coming slowly, slowly, to roost. I see truth and reconciliation commissions starting from South Africa and now all over the world rooting out old sins that have been hidden in the dark so that they may be healed in the light. When enemies embrace, there is the peaceable Kingdom of God, a picture of righteousness once again being shed abroad in the hearts of humanity. I see those who seriously take the claims of Jesus on their lives choosing to stand in faith that the self-sacrificial, loving way of the Kingdom is the only way to live.

I see all of this, and yet, like you, I look forward to more. The Kingdom is both now and not yet, here and not here, and living faithfully means living in light of the brokenness of this present age in hope for wholeness in the life to come. And if we are citizens of this now and not-yet Kingdom, then we need to exult in the days when it's *now* and sigh during the days when it's *not yet*, all with the view that when Jesus calls himself the morning star—the first sign of morning—he means that the night will soon be over. We are creatures of this coming King, like an exaltation of larks flying higher than any other bird in the morning, and seeing just beyond the curve of the horizon the coming light of day. We can see that there will be no sea. It is to this dawn that we bear witness. Not just with empty words, but with our very lives, living out together the hope of the Kingdom still yet to come.

- 1.) What do you want redeemed?
- 2.) What does it mean to “*glorify God and enjoy him forever*”?