

What Unsighted Hope Believes
Genesis 1:1-5; 14-19
Revelation 21:22-22:5

“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

A few years ago, a friend told me the story of an exchange between an alumnus of a well-known university and a panel of university chaplains. The man asked what students were like these days, and one of the chaplains replied, “Well, sir, I think you would be pleasantly surprised. Students are becoming involved again in issues of justice; they are volunteering more and more to tutor in the city and help at the soup kitchen; they are constantly circulating petitions on human rights....” On and on she went about the students’ moral stands and ethical activities, while the rabbi on the panel—at first subtly and then breaking out into a grin—caused the protestant chaplain to stop what she was saying and turn to him. “Obviously, Rabbi, you have something to say!” “All you have said is true,” he said quietly, “but they have no eschatology.”

Eschatology, from the Greek “last things,” has to do with what you believe about the ultimate destiny of creation. They have no eschatology, he said, which is to say that where we believe ourselves to be going and with whom—what we believe about God’s presence and purpose in history--has everything to do with what we do and dare, day in and day out. Or to put the matter bluntly, our ethics have everything to do with our eschatology.

I bring this up because the table set before the world this morning is the table where we are invited to enact our eschatology, enact the future that is coming toward us in Jesus Christ. In bread broken and wine poured out, in peace dared across every finite boundary, we are invited to behold eternity entering time, light overcoming the darkness even now: here we glimpse, in the words of poet Wendell Berry, “what unsighted hope believes” and are returned to the known world changed. How can this be?

Paradoxically, to connect the eschatological dimension of the meal with our ethics, we need to begin at the beginning and trace the light in the first of Genesis that becomes the light of the world in the fullness of time and that foreshadows (or fore-shines) the light in the last of Revelation when “there will be no night [and] they will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light”. Bear with me for the next few minutes while I whistle in the dark.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, according to the priestly account of creation, when God began to call into being everything that is, the first word out of God’s mouth was, “Let there be light!” Given that the sun and moon, the stars and the planets would not come into being until the fourth day, what sort of light could this be? Said Rabbi Eleazar by way of a midrash, “With the light that God created on the first day, one could see from one end of the world to the other.” Likewise said Aristobulus of Alexandria in the middle of the second century B.C., the first day was the day “in which the light was born by which *all things* are seen together.”

That is to say, the light that was called into being by God’s word when time itself began is eternal light—is God’s glory--entering time.” And as the light that is God’s glory is revealed in time, for one brief shining moment, all things are seen together...all things are seen whole...all things are one. In this sense, the end is implicit in the beginning.

But notice, in the second place: God did not say “Let there be darkness!” Rather the light spoken into time by God’s word must have made the darkness, covering the face of the deep, apparent. We have talked before about this darkness—on Sundays that fall after Tsunamis and earthquakes and floods--the darkness unwilled by God, the darkness of uncreated chaos that threatens the goodness of creation. Yet in the beginning, God called the light “Day!” and the darkness God called “Night!”

Now if this first light illumines all things, from beginning to end, then, in the third place, this light also illumines the darkness from beginning to end. Therefore, said Rabbi Eleazar, as soon as God spoke light into time and saw all things from beginning to end, God “observed the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion of mankind, and saw that their conduct was depraved.” In other words, in the creatures created in God’s image to reflect the light of God’s glory in the world, God saw that they preferred the darkness to the light. Time and time again, they turned from the light that is light in order to worship the lights created on the fourth day: bowing before the sun and moon, the stars and planets as though they were gods, as though the created things of nature were proper objects of the creatures’ worship. And likewise in these latter days, says Robert Jenson, God continues to behold his creatures who have long ago “lost their faith in the world’s divinity (sun, moon, stars, planets) without coming to faith in the Creator; [God has beheld] small-souled [mortals] no longer compelled to bow,” says Jenson, who are content instead to exploit.

So, said the Rabbi in the fourth place, God “proceeded to secrete His light from them.” I take this to mean that the light by which creation is seen whole, from beginning to end, a light we have refused, is a light now hidden from us by God (secreted) or, as the old confession goes, forgotten by us in the blindness of our hearts, because we have preferred the darkness.

Translated into the real lives we lead, because we prefer the darkness, because we do not see the other in the light of God, we do not see one another whole; we see only in part and, God knows, we judge the broken parts to be all there is to see; we mistake the distorted image in time for the person the other is for all time. We presume, at the grave, brokenness to be the last word, the damning word, except for a precious few. So Rabbi Eleazar’s midrash reasons that God has secreted the light only “for the righteous in the time-to-come....” It is an eschatology that leads

to a particular sort of ethics, an ethics that is a boon to organized religion!

Now I am whistling in the dark about all of this except if it should come to be that the light, which was in the beginning and was secreted from us because of our turning, should be revealed for a moment in time: say in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that gave light to the Israelites in the wilderness; or the glory that passed by Moses as he stood in the cleft of the rock, God's hand covering him lest he see the glory face to face and die; or even in the glory that departed from Israel when the ark of the covenant was captured; and the glory that all flesh will see together, promised by Isaiah to God's people in exile, the same light and promised glory that would rise upon God's people when they returned to the land. This is the light that illumines the world from beginning to end; the light by which all things are seen together: the light of the world that was in the beginning and was with God and was God; the light that, in the fullness of time, became flesh and lived among us such that we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father.

"I am the light of the world," said Jesus. And whether you are the woman at well caught in apostasy or the other one caught in adultery, whether you are the man born blind or the one in ten lepers, whether you presently find yourself in the crowd clamoring to be healed or identify with the thieves crucified beside him, in his light, each is seen whole: each of us in his light are beheld from beginning to end as wholly ourselves, because the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Put another way, if you want to see yourself whole, look at him.

I think this must be the light in Rembrandt's 1654 etching of the Emmaus Supper, the light emanating from the risen Lord at table and causing the one disciple to rise from his chair, hands clasped in prayer. His actions, I read, evoke Isaiah 60: *Arise, shine, for thy light cometh*

and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Apparently the Dutch Bible here explains that “God speaks in this verse to his Church, which will be enlightened ‘like a bright, shining sun’ by God’s glory that will spread through the earth, like the Heavenly Jerusalem of the End of Days.”

All of which brings us to our own Emmaus table this morning, and to a foretaste of the new Jerusalem where the light that was in the beginning is the Lord God who awaits us as our light in the end. All of John’s statements about the “End”, says Eugene Boring (whose unfortunate name is not a commentary on his commentary), every statement in the Book of Revelation about the End is a statement about God: “God himself is the eschatological reality that embraces all things. Not an event, then, but a person awaits us at the End, who banishes night and makes all other lights unnecessary.”

But equally astonishing in relation to much that passes for eschatology in the church is John’s revelation that the end is a city, an interdependent human community, “where the beauty of life,” says Boring, “is not a solo but a symphony.” He writes this as the earthly Jerusalem lay in ruins, telling about-to-be-martyred Christians that God finally will not make all new things, but will make all things new. God will not discard but take the broken cities and the broken hearts and the broken lives that are in ruins, even on this Sunday across the globe, and in the light that is God, everything that was broken finally will be seen whole and seen together.

Put another way, in the new Jerusalem that is God, nothing will be lost and none will be left out. The new Jerusalem includes the nations and the kings that had opposed God in time and yet, seen whole, are among the redeemed, sees John. And even though, in the end, some are still on the outside, the gates of the city are eternally open and her roads are one way, so that those on the outside are forever free to enter in.

The ethics that follow from this eschatology are as obvious as they are hidden in the

world today, as obvious as the light hidden from those who prefer the darkness. At this table set throughout the world, the light of the living Lord that was in the beginning and was with God and was God emanates on Christ's church. We are to be a foretaste of that city in this world. In his light the whole world is invited, in bread broken and cup poured out, to see all things together, all things made new, from one end of the world to the other, from the beginning of time until its end. And once we have glimpsed the world in this light, we can only return to the world as it is determined of us, as we are destined: not only to see all things, but also to join with all things being made new in the light of God's love. Eschatology and ethics! To "see, or seem to see," says the poet, "Far backward as through clearer eyes/To what unsighted hope believes:/The blessed conviviality/That sang Creation's seventh sunrise,/Time when the Maker's radiant sight/Made radiant everything He saw,/And everything He saw was filled/With perfect joy and life and light." Thanks be to God.