

May 15, 2022
Easter 5
Revelation 21:1-6
“Eminent Domain”

“He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

No landowner ever wants to hear the phrase “eminent domain.”

Eminent Domain is *“the right of a government or its agent to expropriate private property for public use, with payment of compensation.”* (dictionary.com). Eminent domain is often invoked so that major public projects such as roads, schools, and other public spaces might be built. While owners are compensated according to fair market values, being forced off one’s land is often the inciting factor in lawsuits and public protests; but in the end, the needs of the public usually outweigh the desires of the private owner of the property that is being seized.

Many people in New Jersey learned about eminent domain when Interstate Highway 78 was being built. I-78 is a major east-west thoroughfare through my home state, passing a few miles north of our home. When plans to construct the highway were announced, many landowners objected since it would mean that their property would be taken, and they would be forced to move. While there were many protests and lawsuits, the state succeeded in buying the land in almost all cases – except when it came to the Hyde estate, which included a historic home that was on the National Register of Historic Places (and in which George Washington may or may not have slept). The highway was planned to pass directly through the property, but since a historic home could not be demolished plans were made to move the house to another location nearby, which proved to be a monumental task that caught the attention of the entire community. On the day of the move, people lined the road to catch a glimpse of something that is rarely seen, because while it is quite common for someone to travel to a home, it is another matter when a home travels to you!

The memory of that old house traveling to a new location came to mind when I looked at today’s second lesson from the book of Revelation, in which the city of God comes down to be with God’s people: *“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”* (Revelation 21:2). While the focus of much of the book has been on heaven (including last Sunday’s reading in which John of Patmos sees *“a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”* – 7:9), the focus now shifts from heaven to earth, for it is to earth that the heavenly city descends. God’s presence, until now hidden behind the vault of heaven, now dwells with those who dwell in the new Jerusalem. The throne of God is in the midst of the city, and healing, sustenance, and relief only glimpsed at previously are described in greater detail. John picks up themes from Isaiah in which a new heaven and a new earth will replace the ones that have vanished:

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” – Isaiah 65:17.

“For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants and your name remain.” – Isaiah 66:22.

John also picks up on the theme of newness proclaimed by the prophet (*“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”* – Isaiah 42:9), hinted at in the promises to the angels of the seven churches and the song that greets the Lamb:

“If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.” – 3:12.

“They sing a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.’” – 5:9-10.

John proclaims that what is “past,” the provisional rather than the fundamental, is no more: *“for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea was no more.”* (21:1). The “sea” was a threatening place to be endured or conquered; it had been an object of judgment that was now removed: *“Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”* (12:12).

“In the narrative of Revelation, the sea has been the source and the operational base for the evil forces lined up against God and God’s people. It is from the sea that the beast, the personification of empire’s deadly reach, had come. It was over the sea that Babylon had ruled as a tyrant. With the sea removed, there is no chance that the world will slip again into the nightmare of sin.” – Brian Peterson.

In this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, John sees the holy city descending out of heaven. That which descends from heaven is a blessing rather than a curse on humanity, for it is from God. Jerusalem is likened to a bride; the bride’s voice had been silenced in Babylon (*“... and the light of a lamp shall shine no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more”* – 18:23); the long-promised marriage will now begin (*“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”* – 19:7-8).

“It is the brightness and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth that he is despised and rejected, but he will come again and will appear in glory. He will bring a brightness so wonderful that all creatures will be made more beautiful than they are now; the light of the moon will be like the present light of the sun. Trees, leaves, grass, fruit, and all things will be seven times as lovely as they are now.” – Martin Luther, 1531.

As he beholds, this vision, John hears a voice from the throne, a “great voice” from heaven (*“And from the throne came a voice saying, ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.’”* (19:5)). The voice announces that *“see, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be*

with them" (21:3). God's dwelling ("tabernacle," *skene*, the word used to describe the Incarnation in John 1:14: *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*) will now be among "mortals" (*anthropoi*). God's dwelling with people characterizes the life of the holy nation in the Old Testament and the new Jerusalem in the vision of Ezekiel:

"And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people." – Leviticus 26:12.

"You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other." – Joel 2:27.

"The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD is There." – Ezekiel 48:35.

In the New Testament, God's dwelling (tabernacle) is the life of a holy, and so separate, people (*"I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people ... and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."* – 2 Corinthians 6:16-18). Three times in this verse God is said to be "with them." The use of the preposition "with" (*meta*) is in the sense of accompaniment and belonging; in the new Jerusalem, mortals are now God's "peoples."

"The new Jerusalem descends from God. In John's vision, the final hope is not that we go up to heaven when we die. Salvation is not us going to God, but God coming to us ... Salvation is found only in God. We often speak about salvation as 'going to heaven,' but that is adequate only if we realize that 'heaven' is a metaphor for dwelling in God." – Peterson.

The presence of God among God's people in the new Jerusalem is so intimate that God will *"wipe every tear from their eyes."* (21:4). This is the third time this promise has been proclaimed in Holy Scripture; it was previously by Isaiah (*"Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from the earth, for the LORD has spoken."* – Isaiah 25:8) and in John's vision of the heavenly multitude who *"will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, not any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* (7:16-17). All that has caused tears to be shed will have no place in the presence of God who dwells with God's people:

"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." The voice of God announces that what had been prophesied has now been fulfilled: *"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Isaiah 43:18-19).

"God will wipe away every tear ... The promise is not only that God will wipe away any tears that may happen to linger on our cheeks after the Last Day, but that God will reach back through time to wipe away all the pained tears ever shed." – Peterson.

The one seated on the throne now announces that *"see, I am making all things new."* (21:5). The word "new" as used in Revelation does not mean simply another or an improvement on the former, but an entirely new creation unlike what was known in the past (*"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* – 2 Corinthians 5:17). John is then commanded to *"write this, for these words are*

trustworthy and true." It is our assurance that the Word of God that is proclaimed to us is truly the *"word of eternal life"* (John 6:68), the Word of our Lord that is *"a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path"* (Psalm 119:105). The Word of God proclaimed to us in Holy Scripture is the foundation upon which the Church of Jesus Christ is built:

"Our congregation confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the Church's doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church." – ELCIC Model Constitution for Congregations.

The voice from the throne then proclaims to John that *"It is done!"* (21:6), similar to Jesus' declaration of the fulfillment of his mission from the Cross when our Lord cries out *"It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*" (John 19:30). The one who has accomplished all that was promised identifies himself as *"the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,"* the God who is *"from the beginning, is and every shall be, world without end. Amen."* In the declaration that *"to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life,"* the Lord promises that water will no longer pose a threat, for the waters have returned to the control of the one who created them (*"He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who had heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."* 14:7). The present tense of God's declaration that *"I am making all things new"* suggests that God is continually making things new here and now:

"So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." – 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

In words that are not included in our lectionary text, God promises that *"those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children."* (21:7). It is an announcement of our fundamental relationship with God that is established in Holy Baptism, where through water and the Word we are *"reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ."* (ELW Holy Baptism). Because we are not God's children, we are also heirs of God's promises and the assurance of God's blessings that abide with us always:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." – 1 Peter 1:3-5.

Because we are God's children, we have the assurance that God abides with us always, that God's home has come to us as God makes his dwelling with us and promises that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is our assurance that while suffering and death will continue to define our lives in the present, the day is surely

coming when the powers of sin, death, and the devil will be no more, because when we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are inheritors of the promise that *"if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."* (Romans 6:5).

"The last thing God wants to offer is a pie-in-the-sky portrait of a dreamland utopia far removed from the human scene. The new city is not a remote oasis beyond the clouds, but it comes down from heaven to the world of human beings, for it is among human beings that God wishes to dwell. The new Jerusalem is a manifestation of 'God with us' as expressed in the covenant promise." – Richard Jeske.

The word of hope proclaimed to people who had suffered under the oppression of the Roman Empire (identified by "Babylon" in Revelation) is also a word of hope for anyone who is suffering from disease or pain, anyone who feels alone or abandoned, and anyone who is grieving the death of a loved one. It is a word of confident hope that while we will suffer in the present day, the days are surely coming when God will come to dwell with us and will wipe away all tears that we have shed, while assuring us that all that has caused us sorrow and pain – even death itself – will be no more. It is the reason why this text is often read at funeral service, where we both remember and mourn the death of the one who is gone from our sight while we hear the Good News that because God has claimed us as God's children in the waters of Holy Baptism, *"neither death nor life shall ever from the Lord his children sever."* Our baptism into Christ does not shield us from the pain and suffering of this world, but it assures us that pain and suffering are not the final word for those who abide in the loving presence of the Lord.

"The tradition of Jerusalem takes its stand on two basic affirmations concerning the human condition: the first is that suffering is real and is the existential lot of 'fallen' humanity – 'All flesh is grass ... surely the people is grass.' [Isaiah 40:6-7]. The second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore that it need not and must not become our preoccupation, the object of our *ultimate* concern, for 'the Word of God will stand forever.' Both of these affirmations must be sustained if we are to be faithful to this tradition." – Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*.

The sight of a home coming down the street was an event that was discussed long after Highway 78 was completed. While it is a rare event that is a consequence of eminent domain being declared by a state or provincial government, it is our assurance that the "eminent domain" of God is one that comes to us, a domain that seeks not to evict us from our home but to gather us into our heavenly home where we will dwell with God and God's people forever, where all tears will be wiped from our eyes, where death and everything that seeks to destroy us or separate us from God's love will be no more. It is our confident assurance that God is with us always, that the God who has been our help in ages past will be our hope for years to come; God will shelter us from the stormy blasts that we may face, for God is and will always be **our eternal home.**

Amen.