

21: ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

I have one more scripture to share with you for this wee homily on this high holy day in the life of the Church. It is one which many will recognize as familiar. But, first, let's unpack this reading from the Revelation given unto John, the only apostle who (according to tradition) did not taste the martyr's death. John is offering a word of hope to the Christians being persecuted, and he does so by repeating, as best as he can describe, an apocalyptic vision given unto him.

After all the things he earlier described, when he gets to chapter 21, John reveals that when heaven is fully realized, God's home will be among . mortals . Now, that's a concept we have been studying in our Monday night book study "Surprised by Hope," that, quite frankly, comes as a surprise to many people.

So many people think of heaven as being a place "up there" where we go when we die. But John says, *No, when the Kingdom of Heaven is fully realized, it's going to be here – on earth redeemed – with the people resurrected. Here. Not up there.* Did John get it wrong? After all, the book of Revelation is kind of "out there" in lots of parts.

No, let me suggest, that John has got it **spot on**. In Jesus' first sermon, remembered by Matthew, he went about saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven **IS AT HAND.**" And in the prayer Jesus taught, the first petition is that God's kingdom will come, **on earth as in heaven.**

Sometimes, it seems that Christianity is regarded by so many people as just some kind of "fire insurance" to make sure that we are saved from the fire place when we die. Even though it's what folks from other churches may insist is the only thing that it's all about – being "saved" – that really misses the mark of what Jesus spent His

life teaching, and His death and resurrection showing – it's about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, I'm going to quote you a figure that I'm pretty sure is accurate. I say so, because the computer figured it out for me. So, it must be a better count than if I tried to go through and underline and count each reference. In the Gospels, "**kingdom**" is spoken about 115 times, and "**save**" + "**saved**" + "**salvation**" is mentioned 46 times.

The Kingdom is at hand. Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. **Thy kingdom come**, Thy will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven**. Not **pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye**. No, He's talking about **cake by the lake**.

There are some ways in which this is symbolized – some familiar to us, and others not so much, perhaps. In the Orthodox Church, the iconostasis is the icon covered wall separating the sanctuary (the area containing the Altar Table) from the nave (the part where the congregation gathers to worship). Icons are viewed as windows to heaven. Every week, when they gather, this representation of Heaven right beside earth is remembered to the worshippers.

In both the Orthodox and United Methodist Churches, the body and blood of Jesus in the Sacraments come from the altar to unite earth with heaven. In just about a month, we will see another example of that joiner of heaven and earth, with the **Christmas tree** that connects the stars of heaven with the nativity of earth (as used to be often placed under Christmas trees.)

Let me illustrate this with something other than symbolism used in churches. Many of you will remember from your readings, or movie going, the C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (the first written of the *Narnia Chronicles*) in which the wardrobe in the Professor's house was the portal between earth and Narnia. **Outside the wardrobe – only what most thought was all there was. Inside the wardrobe the realization that there was very much more right at hand – if only you would experience it.**

Jesus understood. And He tried to get us to understand – the Kingdom of Heaven is here – right now – and yet, not completely. It is, and it is becoming. What Jesus tried to get us to do was to **see it here in our midst and live AS IF we voluntarily chose to live under its authority.**

In the past couple of weeks, I stumbled across an article written about good ol' C.S. Lewis. He didn't just write mystical books. Some say that the whole *Narnia Chronicles* books were really about God's Kingdom. Many of his books were direct discussions of Christianity and its doctrines. But what he did – according to this reviewer – and it struck me as quite accurate based on the many Lewis books I've read.

What Lewis did was not try so much to "prove" the doctrines of Christianity, as he showed how life looked as. if the doctrine were true.

And, as I stand here in the midst of this holy ground, that's what all of this does for me.

Now – that other scripture: Hebrews 11:32-12:2

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ... ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And ***all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,*** ⁴⁰ ***since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.***

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by **so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the

joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Here, in the midst of this great cloud of witnesses, I am reminded of those words with which Bishop William Boyd Grove blessed us in benediction on an All Saints Sunday here a few years ago. I've condensed them into the orange block on the front of your bulletin.

Today, on this high, holy day, the veil between the living and the dead is pulled back, and that which separates us from them is but a gossamer web. Here, today, this is a thin place. Here, today, this is indeed Holy ground. PAY ATTENTION.

This great cloud of witnesses – of **PEOPLE WE HAVE KNOWN** -- reminds us that heaven and earth are side by side. If we listen – very, very carefully – we can hear them cheering us on ... because apart from us their reward is not complete.

What would it mean if we lived **AS IF** we believed this?

What would it mean if we lived **AS IF** we believed we are not alone.

What would it mean if we lived **AS IF** we believed that we are not in this for just ourselves.

What would it mean if we lived **AS IF** we believed – **what they know for sure now** -- that the Kingdom of Heaven is depending on us to do our part – and **our part is not all about us**.

Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. **Thy Kingdom** come, Thy Will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven**. May I be quiet enough that I really listen to what this great crowd of witnesses is whispering, and may I live **AS IF** I really believed that it's real.