

Pregnancy, the series, #4: Preparing the Nursery – Revelation 21:1-6
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV –5th Sunday of Easter (April 28) 2013

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 man. 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."

This is our fourth in this sermon series on Pregnancy, a series that will culminate on **May 19, PENTECOST**, the **birth of the Church**.

As we get closer to the delivery date, I hope you remember to bring your baby gifts for the Baby Shower: that in just two weeks. We are having a Baby Shower on Sunday, May 12 (Mother's Day) for some expectant mothers identified through our mission Project CDOM, who have great needs for their babies that their financial situation won't cover.

Today's look into this pregnancy is going to take us in a different location. For the past three weeks, we have LOOKED INWARD: (1) discovering the presence of the baby, and then looking how important are the (2) things we say to the baby in the womb, and (3) the way we touch the baby in the womb. (4) Today, we turn our gaze OUTWARD: HOW ARE WE GOING TO PREPARE THE NURSERY INTO WHICH THE BABY IS GOING TO ARRIVE?

I'd like for us to remember the image, described in the sermon last week, from the founder of Methodism, the Rev'd Mr. John Wesley, who (*although he never fathered any children biologically*) has down through the years been called "**Our Father in Christ, the Rev'd Mr. John Wesley.**" He used the notion of the baby in the womb to describe the Kingdom of Heaven.

Wesley wrote that **the Kingdom of Heaven is all around us**. He said that **our earthly existence is like being a baby in its mother's womb. All around that baby's mother is the Kingdom of Heaven, which is like all the world around the pregnant woman. It is so close, and only separated by a thin membrane.**

Wesley concluded that while the baby is content in the moment with life within the womb, so are we content with the life around us. Like the baby is **reluctant**, and **sometimes afraid to go through the difficult birth process**

so too, we are sometimes reluctant and afraid to go through that doorway we call death into the next stage of our life in the Kingdom of Heaven, unfettered by these earthly bodies.

A couple of weeks ago, in a book by Corrine Ware: *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, I came across a very good description of Jesus' life and ministry:

Jesus, if nothing else, demonstrated a very real belief in the other realm – the spiritual world, the Kingdom of Heaven – that coexists with the WORLD of FIVE SENSES.

As I thought upon that notion, I realized just how true it is. **[repeat quote!]**

In all of His teaching, Jesus talks, teaches, and shows – more than anything else – about the Kingdom of Heaven. He clearly did NOT believe that the Kingdom of Heaven is merely “where we go after we pass through the doorway called death.” For Jesus, whose first public preaching began with the words: **THE KINGDOM IS AT HAND**, this other realm is going on just beyond our normal five senses – if only we will pay attention.

- **For the baby not yet born, the Nursery in which s/he will live is just right outside the womb, all around her/him.**
- **What kind of nursery will we prepare for the baby?**
- **What is your notion of the Kingdom of Heaven that exists all around you?**

The apostle John received a Revelation. Part of that Revelation was read as today's scripture.

Part of my sermon preparation usually involves a search of previous sermons, to make sure that I don't repeat illustrations or metaphors.

(Did you know that if a preacher preaches the exact same sermon over and over, but changes the illustrations, the great majority of people will not realize that it's the same sermon. However, if a preacher preaches an entirely different sermon, but repeats the illustration, most of the congregation will believe that the preacher is re-preaching an old sermon.)

When I typed “Revelation 21” into my computer search, I came up with JUST ABOUT EVERY FUNERAL SERMON I’ve ever preached.

Today’s scripture – and the 23d Psalm – are part of almost every funeral; the words and images are THAT powerful.

HOWEVER, the *words were not written for a funeral context*. The words were written as encouragement for a church facing persecution.

Today, we are not living in an age of persecution of the Church. But surely we can see the worth of the comparison.

Using today’s jargon, in which so very often church leaders use business model jargon like “ministry action plan” to describe their way to “save the church,” we could describe what’s going on around us here at Saint Marks, in Charleston, WV, USofA:

We are part of a fairly successful local operation of a franchise (UMC) that is declining, of a business enterprise (the Christian Church) that is going out of business.

The very life of the Church to whom the apostle John’s Revelation was delivered was teetering on the edge of survival, **due to persecution**.

The very life of the Church to whom that scripture is delivered TODAY is teetering on the edge of survival, **due to WHAT?**

- Apathy?
- Secularism?
- Sunday sports programs?
- Lack of parental participation?

Oh, it’s a long list of possible reasons for the decline of the church, but I think one of the chief factors is: **OUR GOD IS TOO SMALL! WE DON’T PAY ATTENTION TO THE MOST IMPORTANT THING OF JESUS’ TEACHING and LIVING: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND!**

What the baby feels about life, when it is born, will largely be dependent upon the nursery prepared for the baby’s arrival.

As A.W. Tozer wrote in The Knowledge of the Holy: *What comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of [humanity] will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and [human’s] spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than the idea of God.*

The apostle John was given a Revelation about just HOW BIG is GOD and HOW GLORIOUS is the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

And its not pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye. It's here among us!

It's a theme as old as the Psalmist, as we began our worship with **Psalm 148**: Praise God for God is THAT BIG!

It's a theme as powerful as Paul's words to the Church at Ephesus: **"Now to Him Who by the power at work WITHIN US is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine ..."**

It's as **contemporary as the hymns** we have sung today.

OUR GOD IS AN AWESOME GOD.

H O W B I G I S Y O U R G O D ?

Let me suggest **three ways** you might examine that question in your own life:

- (1) **Where do you go with your problems?** Really, what is the medicine you take when you are hurting? Drugs? Alcohol? Eating? Shopping? Working? Sleeping? Sports?
- (2) **How would you describe your private prayer life?** If you stopped and looked at what you prayed, what you expected, and how much you listened – what would that tell you about HOW BIG is God to you?
- (3) **How do others hear you talk about God?** How BIG would your co-workers, your family, your good friends believe that God is in your life?
- (4) I could also ask a fourth question: **What does your bank account say about HOW BIG is your God?** But I won't do that, because people might say I'd gone from preaching to meddling, but quite frankly the answer to that question may tell the truth the best. But I won't go there today....

Part of the reason why our Christianity would appear to be heading toward bankruptcy today is that too many Christians are practicing **FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM**. ***We say we believe in God, but we operate as though we don't believe in God.*** That's **a pocket size God, a Christ that only appears as a necklace ornament.**

We've got a baby about to be born. What size of God will the baby encounter when s/he appears?

We've got to get to work on the nursery:

Here's your "Honey-do" List for preparing the nursery this next week:

Jesus said, **“Consider the lilies of the field, etc.”** Do the same thing –
 PAY ATTENTION FOR ONE WEEK to how BIG GOD IS all around you.

- + Look at Nature.
- + Look at the intricacies of the human body.
- + PAY ATTENTION TO HOW BIG GOD IS ALL AROUND YOU. You might even see some BIGNESS in some of God’s BEAUTY that you have walked or driven by every day without noticing.

Pay Careful Attention for one week to God’s size in YOUR LIFE.

- Ask yourself if God is bigger than your fears.
- Ask yourself if God is bigger than your doubts
- **Ask yourself if God is bigger than the little voices in your head that are telling you something other than I AM A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD.**
- **Pay Attention to the things in your life that are VERY MUCH REAL but exist outside your WORLD of FIVE SENSES.**

+ See, I am making all things new.

+ See, the home of God is among the people – right here, right now.

+ Our God is an awesome God. Pay attention!

+ THE BABY’S LIFE AND FUTURE DEPEND UPON IT.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.