

Year C, Easter 6

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Revelation 21:1-10, 22-22:5 (Common English Bible, c. 2011)

### Shall We Gather at the River?

An old hymn dating from 1864, the year before the Civil War ended, asks “Shall We Gather at the River.” The river according to the book of Revelation contains life giving-water that flows from the throne of God and from the Lamb. The leaves of the trees that grow on the edge of this river are for the healing of the nations. Do we know how that healing works and our part in it?

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” John has his vision in the midst of turbulent times. The world looks broken. No one knows what will happen and it’s easy to panic and clutch onto things hoping to stay afloat. His vision responds to all of this. He sees a new heaven and a new earth. Something new has arrived and it has displaced the old. Even the sea, that ancient symbol of chaos and confusion is no more in John’s vision. All the frothing and foaming have ceased.

The new thing appears as the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It’s from heaven; that place outside human rivalry, envy, jealousy and conflict. This force-field of tension we get caught up in has disappeared in the holy city where all are like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. This bride, unaware of her peers and how impressed they may be with her appearance, focuses on her husband, the Lamb of God, the Christ. Her singular and simple focus makes her beautiful. The passage shimmers with shifting images.

John now hears a loud voice coming from the throne. “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind.” The voice names no specific group; not the Jews, not the Christians, but all humankind. The voice announces God’s location and it is here with us and not some distant place far away.

“They will be his peoples.” “Peoples” not people suggesting that God likes diversity. All of this has been written to give us hope. It is an announcement of a new reality that is profoundly true, coming and already here in the Lamb of God.

The voice from the throne speaks a second time. “Look! I am making all things new. Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Trustworthy and true; how refreshing! Where do we find voices we can say that about, particularly when they are talking about reality and the future? Can any voice be trusted? Don’t all voices carry a self-serving agenda?

Now the voice intimately addresses John in a quieter tone. “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” The voice tells us we have all the pieces we need now. In Jesus, the slain Lamb of God, revelation is complete. We live on the other side of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. All is done!

“To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.” Compassion, forgiveness, and willingness to suffering rather than impose suffering is the water from the life-giving spring.

It's not easy and the temptation to quit or get around it is strong but "those who emerge victorious will inherit these things. I will be their God, and they will be my sons and daughters."

Sadly, we come now to where John of Patmos fails to drink freely from the life-giving spring his vision points to. Even he falls into typical hell-bent religiosity. The text speaks for itself. "But for the cowardly, the faithless, the vile, the murderers, those who commit sexual immorality, those who use drugs and cast spells, the idolaters and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. This is the second death."

John of Patmos doesn't seem to have a way of understanding how we bring hell on ourselves and so resorts to "hellfire" language. Many scholars think John of Patmos was part of the Christian community in Jerusalem who had difficulty with Paul. Paul and the writers of Mark, Luke and John had worked this out and understood Jesus in a deeper way than the folks in Jerusalem, but the writer of Revelation has not been in a community willing to go that far. Even the New Testament must be read through the eyes of the non-violent Jesus.

Beginning in verse 22 the vision presents us with a series of surprises. John of Patmos says "I didn't see a temple in the city, because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." Temples aren't needed when all sacrifice has ended. Religion and all it represents has ended. Instead we have the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb taking the place of religion. This is the religion-less Christianity Bonhoeffer envisioned while in prison. Religion creates an "in" and an "out" and John's vision of the New Jerusalem moves us beyond that.

"The city doesn't need the sun and the moon to shine on it, because God's glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." The light illumines human behavior revealing the driver of darkness and provides an alternative. This is why "The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." God's glory lights the sky and the Lamb is the lamp that reveals it. Even the kings of this earth will learn to live by it. Even they will one day model behavior they see in the Lamb. They will rival each other to see who can serve their people the best. Does this give you hope? It does me.

"Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there." So it is that everything will be filled with light with no room for darkness. This is a description of the character of God.

"Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is vile and deceitful, but only those who are registered in the Lamb's scroll of life." Only those who are living as the Lamb does are here. John almost resorts again to the language of "in" and "out" but he is trying to portray a kingdom that is beyond words. Even our words are fallen and have become carriers of deceit. Maybe this is why we need poetry and the sacraments.

"Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the city's main street." On each side of the river is the tree of life that constantly provides fruit. The leaves of this tree are for the healing of the nations. Notice there is no tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's not needed here for, "There will no longer be any curse." The curse we have called down on each other since Adam and Eve ate the apple disappears. No one will be saying you are bad and we must destroy you.

The problem of identity will go away, for each of us will know whose we are, for the Lamb's name will be written on our foreheads. We won't covet the being of another and try to grasp it from them, for we will see his face and his face will hold us in its gaze.

We end by asking, "Shall we gather at the River?" The refrain replies, "Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God." Amen.



[Anthony Mark Lamort](#) Thank you for your particularly helpful comments on John of Patmos. (Thanks for the rest of the post too, but I was casting about for a concise way to explain J o P's "hellfire for others" without writing a thesis!



[Carol Wimmer](#) I like this. I take a slightly different view of John's words where you indicate that he falls back into religiosity.

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I don't hear John sentencing these people to hell, nor do I hear God sentencing them to an eternal lake of fire. Instead, I hear John calling out those who have chosen to bring hell on themselves even when presented with a life-giving alternative. So, for a second time ... they choose death instead of life.

Their first spiritual death may have come about because of ignorance, but here is the kingdom of heaven in all of its beauty and still, they choose hell for themselves. So they die again ... this time fully aware of their choice.

The message for me is not that John fell back into religiosity, but that he points out the fact that some people will choose to reject even the best scenario offered, but that is not God's doing or God's choice. John simply states the fact that some people in his vision chose not to be victorious and they brought the lake of fire on themselves.

It's not a pretty picture. But God is not the villain. John is not indicating God's judgment on sin. I read it as a human decision to reject the light in favor of staying with darkness and death.



[Tom Truby](#) Thank you. This is very helpful and I find myself agreeing. I wasn't terribly comfortable with my own interpretation but your explanation does make it clear.