

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Revelation 21:1-6

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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then 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 water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

## SERMON

Easter has been called, “The laughter of God.” It was the day God laughed at death and the devil. The custom, in some places, is to tell jokes during Easter. So, we will. A minister used an object lesson for his sermon. He had four cans, and into each can he put a worm. The first can had alcohol, the second can had cigarette smoke, the third chocolate syrup and the fourth rich black soil. He left them and later returned. He opened the first three cans and announced that the worm in each was dead! Then, in his fourth can he said, “The worm is alive.” What do we learn from this?

A little girl sitting toward the front of the church said in a loud voice, “We learn that if you drink, smoke and eat chocolate you won’t have worms.”

When your children approach their final years in high school, before they launch out into the world on their own, you wonder if you have prepared them for the next world, they are going to live in. To do so you have fewer restrictions for them than when they were in Middle School. You allow them to handle a little more money; after all, soon they will have to handle a lot more. You allow them to stay up later, because they will soon be on their own and they will have a lot of time on their hands.

You teach them life skills, if they are willing to learn. When our son was a senior in high school Sally taught our son how to wash his own clothes, and told him, “Don’t send them home from college in a sack for me.”

We lived in a white community, but we tried to prepare our children for the diversity they would soon face. They learned to drive and how to look for a job. One of the tasks that seemed to take forever was to teach our children to be polite and thankful. A great graduation gift is a stack of thank-you notes, not just for the graduation gifts, but for many other things in life. Saying thank you is one of the most important things any of us do.

During the three years the disciples spent with Jesus he was doing something very similar. He was preparing them, and those of us who read his words, for the new kingdom, a kingdom that would begin when he left, and a kingdom that would come in its final form at the end of the world. Some of us refer to the new kingdom as heaven.

Of course it wasn’t just Jesus who prepared us for the next world. Paul did. As did James, and Peter and John, the writer of the book we called Revelation.

Paul, for example, reminded the Galatians that they needed to stop thinking that their people were God’s only people. He reminded them that in the new kingdom gender played no major role, nor did nationality, or economic or social status. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) If you are uncomfortable with diversity, you are going to be uncomfortable in the coming kingdom. Get used to it.

The writers of the Bible did not take a position on current legislation, but they did take a position on some of the people involved in current legislation. Over and over again Biblical people were reminded that they were to welcome the stranger. They reminded people that our ancestors were immigrants – “A wandering Aramean is my father.” This will not tell you what you should do about the new Arizona law, but it does remind you that you ignore the stranger in your midst to your peril. And it reminds you that you ought to treat others as you wish your family was treated. The new kingdom will be full of strangers.

Paul admonished his readers to be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us. One of the ways that happens is in our relationships. What is the key? Mutual service. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21). Husbands serve their wives; wives serve their husbands; parents serve their children; children serve their parents.

And then there is John, the mystic who envisioned a new heaven and a new earth. Have you thought about the next kingdom, the final kingdom, as a place here on earth, the new earth? Most people speak of heaven as a place where disembodied souls float around. That is not John's vision. John had a vision of a material home, a restored planet. The occupants were not body-less beings floating in the clouds, but human beings with some kind of a body, living in a beautiful healthy world that God restores to its original condition, and it is good. This is one of the by-products of the resurrection.

We are warned not to make too much of the architecture of the new kingdom because the main point is that we will be with God, not that we will walk on streets of gold. Yes, the river of life runs through the heart of the city, but what really catches our attention is God's words that come from the throne: the Home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people and God himself will be with them. Alternatively, if you prefer the translation found in *The Message*, God has moved into the neighborhood making his home with men and women!

The new kingdom is a physical reality. We are bodily people and will continue to be so, though our bodies will no doubt be quite different. After all, Jesus did eat fish after the resurrection, but he also could walk through walls.

There is also one other announcement coming from God: I make all things new. There is a subtle invitation for all of us to join in making all things new, or in renewing the earth. Because the kingdom is material, we are to take care of the material-- the earth, the lakes, the air.

The Bible doesn't give us a blueprint of how to care for the earth. It doesn't tell us how to vote, or what to do about climate change. What it does do is to assume that all believers care for the earth. God so loved the world, and so do those who follow him. If you are preparing for the next kingdom, the next world, you have to start taking care of this one. If you plan to be a citizen of God's new creation, you ought to work on this one. I don't know how it is possible to be a Christian and not be an environmentalist of some kind. This is my Father's world, and I don't want people to dirty my father's land, air and water.

We can start almost anywhere. There is a lot of work to be done. It is said that within 6-12 months, visible changes in the environment will always result from people who succeed at improving things. So if you clean up the lakes, or plant trees, or flowers, it will make a difference, a difference you can see.

As always, why you do things makes a huge difference. Of course, it matters how much you do, but it matters even more how much love you put into the doing. Our hearts will tell us what is right. All we need to do is

look around and we can find plenty to do that will show our love for God's creation, and help us to continue to renew the earth.

We, of course, may have a different point of view as environmentalists. We love the creation, but the primary object of our love is the Creator. The Creator gave us a world, a material world. The goal of Christians is to live full in this material world.

I'm often behind the trends, so I just recently read *Eat, Pray, Love*, the book by Liz Gilbert that sold six million copies. I liked it. I'm sorry I missed the discussions after people read it, but that happens when you are one of the last to read it. For the handful of you who haven't read it the author writes a memoir of her travels to three countries...Italy, India and Indonesia. Italy, a country shaped by a Christian tradition, has great food. Of course, Christians are materialists. We celebrate the body and the good things of a God who became flesh. India is Hindu, and their goal is to get out of the body, to transcend the body. I thought she might talk about two different worlds and two different religions, but the difference between the Hindu and Christian approach wasn't mentioned. Though I found the part about her trip to India interesting, I realized what a different approach we have to God. If I am going to meditate, it will be as a bodily Christian, one who is awaiting the resurrection. My goal will not be to empty myself or to get out of my body.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Son of God. We use the word incarnate a lot. God became a human being. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He dwelt among us for over thirty years, and then returned to the Father. John tells us that the commitment of God to share in our lives was not a thirty-three year thing. It was permanent. God is moving his headquarters to earth. The New Jerusalem comes down, and is established here on earth. Heaven and earth embrace. Heaven and earth merge.

In the meantime, we are invited to love the world and take care of it. We are invited to be a part of this new kingdom where there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This is a kingdom where the outcasts and the marginalized are welcomed, where women and men are equal, where children are models of faith, where the high-ranking or people of wealth have no special place. It will be a place of justice, because God is the God of justice. Those who have prayed, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," will have their prayer answered. This will be no remote oasis up in the clouds; it will be here, where we can touch it and see it. In some way the new heaven and the new earth will touch, they will merge. It will be a new kingdom. Now the question is: Are you ready for the kingdom?

Amen. © 2010