

**“Where God Lives”**  
**Text: Revelation 21:1-6**  
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**Atlanta, GA**  
**May 2, 2010**

*“See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” Revelation 21:3a*

Last November, a science fiction disaster film with the title **2012** was released in movie theaters across the country. At the outset, I should confess that I have not seen the movie, and that it appears nowhere on my Netflix queue. Still, I do know this about it from previews and reviews: it chronicles the destruction of much of the world and the efforts of a small group of scientists, politicians, and a particularly heroic science fiction writer to save humanity in the year 2012.<sup>1</sup> Did I catch all the highlights?

At one level, there is nothing unusual about a movie whose plot centers on the end of the world through violent natural disaster. In fact, these calamity movies have become a subgenre unto themselves and tend to be big moneymakers for the movie industry. What might set **2012** apart are its references to and grounding in a range of beliefs about the end times that has come to be called the 2012 phenomenon. Just Google the term and see what you find readily available on the Internet. Over one million pages devoted to theories that the world will come to an end in the year 2012. Mesoamerican calendars, black hole alignment, and geomagnetic reversal are all cited as evidence that catastrophe is only two years away. While the movie may be obvious science fiction, many people across the world are taking this possibility very seriously.

And, as one might expect, this means that the ancient book of Revelation is again being called on to supplement these theories with terrifying Biblical accounts of the end of the world. Perhaps now is a good time for people of Christian faith to read what is actually found in the book of Revelation and what different message this strange and bewildering text might have for us. In my experience, most of us in the mainline Protestant churches ignore the book altogether, or we relegate it to a place reserved either for science fiction novels or fundamentalist interpretations of the end times.

But the book of Revelation is not science fiction or precise prediction. It is theology. It is interested in described who God is and who people of faith ought to be in response to God. In last week’s sermon, I made the case that the book of Revelation ought to be read as a call to hope in the midst of difficult and dangerous times. This morning’s scripture reading, which comes near the end of the book, is my most compelling star witness.

Consider the context of those to whom John is writing. Suffering for their faith under the Roman Empire and its emperor Domitian. Living under constant fear that their home, their church, their

family might be targeted next. These faithful Christians were beginning to wonder if the gods of Rome were perhaps more powerful than the God they came to know in Jesus of Nazareth. Rome's power was everywhere on display, but the power of their God seemed invisible at best and waning at worst. They needed strength to journey on despite daunting odds and negligible influence. They needed a vision of what was to come. The book of Revelation is not a blueprint of the end of the world or a roadmap of the rapture. Revelation is a holy vision of hope to a people in despair.

By the time we come to chapter twenty-one, all opposition to the Lamb has been crushed. The terrible dragon and the monstrous beasts have been cast into the great lake of fire. The question in the minds of all the readers who have made it this far into the book is this: "What will happen next? How will the story end?" The doomsday prophets predict the destruction of the world and all that is in it. The pre-millennialist theologians await the rapture of faithful souls to heaven. But neither one accurately forecasts what comes next in the vision of John. The earth is not destroyed. The faithful are not taken up. Instead, God's kingdom comes down. It is perhaps the most stunning moment in a book not lacking in dramatic and amazing scenes. A new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, a new Atlanta, a new Baghdad, coming down from heaven. And then that voice, with an announcement so unimaginable that it is paraphrased three times to be sure we don't miss it: the home of God is among mortals. If you were looking for God's address, take this down: God lives here, among us.

We Presbyterians have long been distinguished by the seriousness with which we take our view of God. Sovereign is the word we most often used in seminary. The words in the Westminster Confession of Faith, our most historic, and verbose creed, are even heavier: invisible, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty. God's knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so that nothing is to God uncertain or contingent."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the picture we get from the book of Revelation is of a God whose power and authority are unmatched. Creating a new heaven and a new earth are not tasks for the weak and ineffective. But then, the eighty-seventh time I read it, I noticed something in this scripture reading I had never allowed to encounter me before. Actually, I noticed it only because of an experience I had last weekend.

I was having lunch with a friend. We sat down at a table and ordered sweet teas, and then a couple and young son, maybe three years old, sat down at the table next to ours. Within sixty seconds, the child had made his way over to our table and was showing off his new talent: giving high fives while enthusiastically shouting, "right on!" We must have repeated the ritual thirty times before the child was ordered back to his table. On his journey back, Benjamin turned and caught the corner of our table with his right eye socket. He turned and looked at me, squinted a little as he gathered every bit of breath in his lungs, and then he let loose. Screaming. Wailing. Crying hysterically. Since we had developed such a strong relationship, I made a move to comfort him. Not a chance. Within two seconds he had sprinted over to mom and was in her lap. As she wiped the tears from his eyes, her son began to catch his breath and his composure. It was

a heartbreakingly beautiful scene, especially when he finally calmed down enough, and with a big smile, gave his mom a high five. Right on!

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” This is no description of a distant immutable and wholly independent God. This is a God close enough to touch. Near enough to comfort and support. This is a God who lives among us.

The summer after I graduated from college, thanks to the generosity of the Lily Foundation, I traveled with four friends to the Isle of Iona off the coast of Scotland. The trip was to be a spiritual pilgrimage with a group that had become my primary faith community as together we discerned where God was calling us after college. Iona is described as a “thin place,” where the barrier between heaven and earth is narrow. It is one of the holiest places on earth, the site of a sixth-century abbey and a modern-day ecumenical Christian community of worship, prayer, and renewal. It is a place where sheep may safely graze because they outnumber both people and machines. We spent a week there taking in the beauty of the rolling hills, green meadows, and rocky beaches as well as the refreshment of worship, silent meditation, and group prayer. Each evening, over a cup of tea (of course), we would share our experiences with one another and pray together. One evening, as we gathered, we were missing Candice, our most adventurous fellow traveler. After waiting about half an hour, we became concerned. There had been storms on the island that afternoon and we worried that Candice had strayed too far from the village and gotten caught in one. Finally, soaking wet and with a huge smile on her face, our thrill-seeker arrived. As we closed our group prayer later that evening, Candice prayed these words that went immediately into my journal: “O God, I give thanks for getting lost and feeling found.” A paraphrase of John’s Revelation. A statement of faith.

The lost will be found, because God will seek us out. God will wipe every tear from our eyes, John writes. Not from a heavenly distance but right here, in our midst. In Jesus Christ, we see God face to face and we discover that God is not without emotion or passion or concern. God reaches out to us. God comes toward us. John’s vision got it exactly right: when all is said and done, we are not taken up to be with God. God comes to be with us. Immanuel. God is with us.

We experience it all the time. We experience it as this holy table, where bread and cup are shared with neighbors in the pews and ancestors in the faith and where we commune not just with humankind but also and always with the divine host of this immeasurable table. Whether in cathedrals filled with thousands of worshipers or at the bedside of one whose life is nearing its end, God comes close when we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. These fragile human signs of eternal divine promises bring us to the very heart of God. Let it wash over you this morning as you take the bread and the cup. You, who are weary and heavily burdened, give some of it away in the silence and the music. You, who need nourishment for the journey ahead, take it in through the bread of life and cup of salvation. You for whom God has seemed distant for too long, whose worship has been empty and whose life has seemed pointless, do not go in search of God this morning. Stay right there, in those places of uncertainty and doubt, and let God come to you.

Because, at this table, in this community, God is not distant and aloof. God is here. Right here. Now, and every time we choose compassion over hatred and unity over division, the home of God is among mortals. That's you and me, and all of us together.

Here is the invitation: come to this table with hearts open to receive God's presence as a gift and a promise. Come empty handed, because at this table you will receive everything you need from the abundance of God.

God lives here. Immanuel. God is with us. These words are trustworthy and they are true. Who could survive on anything less? Who could ask for anything more?

<sup>1</sup> See [www.sonypictures.com/movies/2012](http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/2012) for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), II:1-3.