

The Apostle John and a Vision of the Bride  
Revelation 21:1-7  
December 1, 2013

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

What we see in the sky has a way of shaping how we live on earth. Go to any major American city and you can find neighborhoods with streets littered with garbage, burned out buildings, boarded up houses, vacant lots, liquor stores, storefront groceries, and, every now and then, a daycare center or a church – with bars on the windows.

People, who live there, daily struggle to survive in such an environment. And all the while, other people drive through the neighborhood without seeing their suffering. Why? Because there, in the sky, hovering high above them, are billboards, advertising the pleasures of life.

Floating in the air, larger than life, you see the latest Lexus. Far off in the distance, you see Eternity – by Calvin Klein. A man with chiseled abs walks the beach with a beautiful woman, inviting you to believe that if you smell like this, you can look like this – and have this – for eternity. The neighborhood fades into the background as your needs and desires loom larger than life.

Advertising distracts you, not from driving, but from living. You physically pass by the needs of others, while mentally you're filled with dreams of your own. Hair care products, cellular phones, fast food, fine jewelry; these things become your field of vision.

Over time, we become accustomed to driving through cities without seeing people; eating in restaurants, standing in line at the grocery, working in office buildings, even coming to church and not seeing people. Our needs and desires are written large in the sky. They overshadow the people who live closer to the ground.

What you see in the sky shapes the way you live on earth. Even as we lift our eyes to the Lord, he becomes our personal self-help genie, a higher power to fix our lives, a heavenly leader who helps us accomplish our dreams. The private fulfilling of personal dreams becomes our religion and overshadows the public work of God's Church in the world; which is why we are blessed to have the apostle John paint a picture in our mental sky.

As we enter into the Advent season, God comes to renew us as his Church. And, surprisingly, he doesn't need the latest book on church planting. He doesn't need some long forgotten quote from Martin Luther. He doesn't even need a profound insight from the emerging church. All he does is take one small patch of empty sky within your imagination, and fills it with a vision that will leave your head reeling and change your life here on earth – or so it was with John.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Re 21:1-7 NIV).*

This is the end of John's visions in the book of Revelation. He has seen God's throne in heaven, the angels, the saints, and the victorious lamb. He has seen the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven censors and the affect they had upon the earth. He has seen demonic hosts gathered in hell and angelic warriors gathered in heaven. He has seen Armageddon, the second coming of Christ, the final resurrection, and the judgment of the human race.

Now, God gives John one last vision. The city of God, descending from heaven, dressed as a bride adorned for her bridegroom. When the entire vision is completed, we find John silently bowing in worship. When he finally does speak, all he can say is "Come, Lord Jesus."

That's how this vision affected John, and that has been the cry of the church in Advent through the ages, "Come, Lord Jesus." This vision certainly turns our eyes toward the future and makes us cry out for the Christ to come – but could it do anything more?

A story is told about pastor who saw a nursing home come to life. It was Saturday afternoon and he was visiting a parishioner. This wasn't a place of life. It made him never want to be here himself, dying in a place like this. And that made him only want to be here all the more for his parishioner, who was ending her life in this home.

She was lying on her bed and he was standing beside her, when they heard a commotion out in the hall. There was laughter, clapping, and people shouting. The parishioner asked him what was happening and, when he went over to the doorway, he saw them. A bride and groom coming down the hall. The bride was beautiful.

She was visiting her grandmother. Her grandmother couldn't make it to the wedding and so, on the way from the church to the reception, she brought the wedding to Grandma. That one short visit brought the nursing home to life. The people were sticking their heads out the doors and smiling and shouting.

When he returned to his parishioner, and described what he had seen, and it changed their conversation. This vision of a bride opened up the books of memory. The elderly

lady began to talk about her own wedding. No white dress. No pastor. No church. Nothing fancy. She was a war bride with a simple service before a justice of the peace. But it was still a wedding, and just for a moment in this place of dying, she remembered who she was – a bride.

John's voice is a voice from the edge; an Advent encounter that opens the book of memory. Of course, John prompts us to long for the future, but he also asks us to remember our past. To remember who we are: not individuals serving our needs through the church; but the bride of Christ, not yet seen in all our glory in this world.

And that's the difficulty, isn't it? The "not yet seen" part. When you can't see the glory of being the Bride of Christ, you tend to forget who you are. For John, it could be his exile on the island of Patmos. That exile could cause him to forget about the Bride of Christ.

Reading the letters to the churches at the beginning of Revelation, we get a glimpse of what it might have been like for those churches. Some had abandoned their first love. Others were listening to false teaching. Some had fallen into sexual immorality. Others into idleness; they were lukewarm and God was about to spit them out of his mouth. Sound familiar?

These letters echo down the corridors of history and are still being talked about today, among us, in the little rooms where we have taken the church because we are afraid she is dying. And we discuss how we can save the church – as if we could save the church.

In fear and frustration we begin to forget who we are, the Bride of Christ, God's own creation. We raise our voices. We get into arguments and fights over what will save the church. We might even see worship wars as anything and everything is suggested and fought over as a way of getting people in the doors and keeping the church alive. As the bride of Christ we can become argumentative and positively ugly.

It reminds you of Bridezillas; a television series that shows the way brides become monsters before their wedding. If you watch these shows, you find that all of these brides have one thing in common. They all have forgotten one fundamental thing. You can't make yourself a bride.

They try to orchestrate their weddings, and they forget that no amount of clothing, cake, flowers, or fancy invitations is going to make you a bride. You can't make yourself a bride. You are a bride because someone loves you. Someone promises to be with you for the rest of his life; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, and he will forsake all others and love you, even laying down his life for you.

That's what lies at the heart of John's vision. The intimacy of God. John's vision is not just about a bride, but about a bride and a bridegroom and the intimacy of God. John's vision starts with a large landscape, a new heaven and a new earth. Then he takes us in closer to see the new Jerusalem, the holy city, descending as a bride from heaven.

Then we get closer still, before the very throne of God, and we hear God the Father speak for just the second time in Revelation. And he says: *“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”* (Re 21:3 NIV).

That means, God has chosen to spend eternity with you. In Christ, God’s love is eternally wrapped up with the lives of his people – for better for worse; even though we try to turn him into our person self-help genie; even though we become argumentative and ugly in our mission to save the church; even though the bride of Christ becomes Bridezilla at times, fighting against him; and even though she does everything she can to destroy her own wedding, to the point of killing her bridegroom. Still, he loves. He comes, he dies, and in that murder is the mystery of our marriage. You are a bride – drop dead gorgeous – because Christ died for you.

Nothing you do could ever make you into a bride. Everything he’s ever done has been done out of love for you. His life, his death, his resurrection – all for you. You stand here in the righteousness of Christ, beautiful in his baptism, glorious in his grace, and he promises to come and reveal this to the world. Until that time, he has given you this little vision in your mental sky. It’s there so you will always remember who you are. You are the bride of Christ. And what we see in the sky shapes how we live on the earth.

Now, you may not see this bride come down from heaven in all her glory in your lifetime. But this Advent encounter asks us to open our eyes. To see that the bride is here. Right next to you. She lives in you and in your bothers and sisters in the faith.

Behold, our Lord says, in this voice from the edge of a new creation, “Open your eyes. Wherever you are called. Wherever you are serving. Open your eyes. Behold. I make all things new.”