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A Mission for the Church: II. Stewards of the Future

Revelation 21:1-3, 22:3-5 New Revised Standard Version "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 as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them... Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

The opening lines of the chapter that follows our scripture this morning has the following phrase: *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God... through the middle of the street of the city."* That doesn't sound like such good news on this morning, does it? And yet the waters we and our friends to the north have been dealing with have hardly been the "waters of life," and certainly not "bright as crystal." No, these waters have been those of frustration and fear, hurt and pain and sometimes even death, and full of debris and ash – the furthest thing from "bright as crystal." And so before we begin this morning, I invite us first to a moment of prayer: *"Gracious God, whose intention is that your whole creation would know life in abundance, we pray this morning in thanksgiving that you are with us even in the midst of hard things, even in the midst of too-much. We know that you have not willed these terrible floods for, as scripture says, you wish no one ill. And so, we pray, when the waters around us become not life-giving but founts of fear and frustration, be with us. Find us with your care. Find us with your hope. Be with those who have suffered huge loss and particularly those who have lost not only homes*

and livelihoods but loved ones. Hold them tight, hold them close. We pray in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, the One Who never leaves us and seeks always to lift us above the deluge. Amen.”

Did any of you wince even a tiny bit when you saw that this morning’s scripture was from the Book of Revelation? Me too. For this strange and wonderful book has often been abused by too many who have taken apparent delight in painting pictures of how God was going to gleefully consign so many people to everlasting hell. And, under the influence of a culture that loves conspiracy theories, too many folks seriously search its pages for alleged predictions about what is going to happen in — take your pick — the stock market, the economy, the Middle East, and so on and so on. But I want to rehabilitate it a bit this morning, for the Book of Revelation is **not** something only to be read at funerals, it is **not** a stick to beat people with; is not a recipe book of predictions about the future. No, the Book of Revelation, rightly approached, can illumine us about our present and its possibilities, it can therefore point us in the direction of how we can cooperate with God’s future, how we can be the “missional church” that God hopes for us, how and why we have something to share that we dare not hide.

As you may know, the Book of Revelation was written at a very difficult time in the life of the early Church. Tradition has it that it was composed by St. John in the early years of the second century, during a time of when the church was being cruelly persecuted. It was written a generation or so after the Roman Empire invaded and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Indeed, Revelation’s harshest words are aimed squarely at the Roman Empire which, in the year 120 or thereabouts, was doing its

utmost to cripple and crush Christianity. It was written in a day and in a time when, quite understandably, members of the Christian church were badly shaken, more and more tempted to hunker down and turn inward, with their nerves too-often failing them and their passion for spreading the gospel too-often diminishing. It was a time when society was being ripped apart by ever-hardening lines that separated “us” and “them,” when much of the culture was at best apathetic and at worst hostile to the church, when church folks’ convictions were wavering and their energy was dissipating, when large parts of the church felt immobilized and weary and dispirited and sometimes more than a little frustrated and tempted simply to huddle up, seeing the future as threat rather than opportunity.

Sound at all familiar? The Book of Revelation can speak to us precisely because it knows something of what our life is like. I do not have to tell you that it is a challenging time to be the church. The day has long come and gone when the culture around us valued the existence of the church in the way that it once did. Even a generation ago, who could have imagined the City approving a sporting event like the one we have dealt with this very morning! And so sometimes **our** nerves fails us and **our** energy flags. The culture around us is no longer even nominally Christian, and in the space of two generations, we have watched the mainline church move from a place of honor at the head of the civic table to a place more and more on the sidelines.

All of which leaves us, it seems to me, with two choices: We can, on the one hand, simply **concede culture’s claim** that the church is no longer relevant, huddling up against the storm around us, turning ever-more inward. **Or**, or, we can choose to

hear and believe and respond to the radical, inviting, empowering passion that John has written about in this book, discovering that indeed this powerful “revelation” can give **us** our marching orders for the **present**, not just the future; we can hear again and yet again the gift of courage and passion and hope that this book is offering us which can overcome our tendencies to be unwitting co-conspirators in the culture’s attempt to make us irrelevant!

So, as we continue this second in our September sermon series reminding us of how our congregation can truly be a church that is focused on mission and not simply maintenance, I think our text from Revelation this morning implies two very specific opportunities for us to be stewards of God’s mission. Now, “steward” and “stewardship” are “churchy” words, yet their meaning is really very simple. Our stewardship is simply the ways that we respond to what God has done and is doing for us. Seen in that light, the first thing to say is that God calls us to be **stewards of our power**. “*What?*”, you might say, “*what ‘power’ do we possibly have?*” What real power do we have in a world that so often sees Sundays as no different from any other day and in which we now seem to compete, just like everyone else, for the scarcer and scarcer time and attention of folks? Well, my friends, we have more power than we realize, for the power we have is precisely the power that comes from knowing that the source of life and hope and meaning comes from **God**, and not just in the bye and bye but now.

And yet here is what far too often happens with us, me included: The culture around us, increasingly secular, increasingly apathetic to and ignorant of the church, with the media increasingly identifying the word “church” with bullying, sends out more and more messages that say “*The church is irrelevant.*” “*The church is a place where*

predators prey and the gullible are taken in.” “The church is judgmental.” And too often we unconsciously internalize those messages ourselves and come to believe and act as if we have no power to really affect our world! But that’s not true. Here’s the way former General Minister and President Dick Hamm puts the point: The message that the church bears is indeed *“powerful because we are the bearers of meaning and mystery — which lasts long, long after money and medicine have failed”*¹ My friends, believe it! Every one of us here is capable of offering enormous good and power back to a world that desperately needs to know a credible, moral, and healing word. How will you do that this week?

And yet here’s the second way we must be stewards: If we don’t pay attention to being **stewards of our talents and our resources**, we will be unable to offer that word with passion and power. Let’s be honest: Do we sometimes downplay the talents that God has given us for being instruments of healing and hope? I know I do sometimes. And yet we Disciples, including those of us here in this wonderful congregation, have an **immense** and too-often-hidden talent for showing folks that God is not an unjust bully, but a loving and caring friend. One reason that so many folks – particularly twenty- and thirty-somethings – are opting out of the church is not because they think the church is somehow “too liberal,” but because they think that the word “church” must forever and always mean hurtful, judgmental, and even abusive — or boring. But we know differently, don’t we? And so in the City of God in which St. John’s vision calls us to

¹Dick Hamm, Presentation on Stewardship to the College of Regional Ministers, December 5, 1999

inhabit, let us commence to have a grand talent show every day! And let that talent show reflect our gift for welcoming the jaded, loving the unlovely, comforting the afflicted, and offering hope to the hopeless. But you and I have too often been too shy or too reticent to offer those talents. Or we haven't wanted to call attention to ourselves. Or we think we don't know how to give that sort of encouraging word of life and hope. Well, my friends, I must respond: **Yes we do!**

The great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells this story: He and his wife Lettie were vacationing in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and they struck up a conversation with an elderly man. As they talked, the man asked Dr. Craddock what he did. Dr. Craddock said "I'm a minister with the Christian Church." The man paused and said, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian Church." He then told Fred his story: He said, "I grew up in these mountains but my mother was not married and everyone knew it. In those days it was a shameful thing and I always felt ashamed of myself. People said ugly things to me and were always making guesses to my face about who my father was. In my early teens I began to attend a little Christian Church back in the mountains. But I always came late, sat in the back, and left early because I was afraid that they would not welcome me since I was, as everyone told me – and this was the word they used to my face -- a bastard. But one day before I could escape early I got stopped. And I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He turned me around and looked long and hard at me. And then he said, 'Son, you're the child of' and I just knew what was coming, and I knew I wouldn't ever go back to that church because that minister was about to shame me. But he said, 'Son you are the child of God. I see

a striking resemblance.’ I left the building that day a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.” Well, Dr. Craddock was moved and asked the man his name. “Ben Hooper,” the man replied. And it was then that Dr. Craddock realized that this was the Ben Hooper had twice been elected as the governor of Tennessee.²

My friends, our mission as the people of God, as ones would not only live in but help to build that city of God of which St. John speaks, is both small and large. It is as small as offering the power of a word of hope, a word of grace, a word of welcome, a word of healing to someone. And it may thereby end up being as large as something that can change a life so profoundly that someone may become another Ben Hooper. What it takes is two things: our belief, indeed, that we **do** have a power to change this world through our words and actions and that we **do** indeed have resources that a world weary of the cacophony of cynicism and the jangling of jadedness needs to hear. How do we do that? By not being afraid of reaching out and offering what we know, to – as I used to tell our toddlers in moments of frustration – “use your words, use your words.” It has been quite awhile since I invited you to carry a couple of what I called our “church business cards” in your purse or wallet, but today I want to give everyone that opportunity again. They’re quite simple. But you never know how powerful they might be. So my challenge to you this morning, as we continue to seize the vision of being a missional church, is to take a couple of those cards from the deacons after worship, put them in your purse or wallet, and then be ready: when you’re standing in line at Safeway or wherever and you strike up that conversation and you sense that

²Adapted from Craddock Stories, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 156-157.

someone needs to know the gentle grace of a welcoming God in the midst of a community that cares – give those folks a card. You don't have to "witness," you don't have to go preach on the streets. But I do believe that Jesus, the one who envisions that new heaven and new earth for each and all, invites you this day and this week to be alert to how you can make a difference, how you can speak a saving word, how you can show someone in darkness how, indeed, God can light up their lives in ways that they never knew possible. Will you do that with me?