

“Heavenly Days...Heavenly Daze”¹

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-8

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Meredith Willson, a writer and musician, is most known for his musical, *The Music Man*, with songs such as “Seventy-Six Trombones Led the Big Parade.” Meredith Willson had an autobiography entitled, *And There I Stood with my Piccolo*. A piccolo, as most of you know, is a very small flute used in an orchestra. Willson was at one time a piccolo player for the John Phillips Souza band.

The title, *And There I Stood with my Piccolo*, comes from the opening story in the autobiography, recounting a recurring dream of Meredith Willson. In the dream, he is playing in a band for a great king in Europe. The king is so impressed with the play of the band that he invites them to bring their instruments and come to the treasure room. It is a treasure room filled with gold, pearls, and fine jewels. The king says to the band members, “Because you have played so well, each of one you is to take your instrument and fill it up with as much treasure as it can hold.” Those with tubas, French horns, and drums exalt in the opportunity.

Says, Meredith Willson, “and there I stood with my piccolo.”

Surrounded by abundance and opportunity but unable to take it in...treasure upon treasure but not able to grasp it...as we read this rich text of Revelation 21 this morning with its vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the new Jerusalem fitted out as bride, no more tears and death, I wonder if we see it but do not grasp it. I wonder if we understand the words but they do not register with us. We stand before this treasure and we have only a piccolo to fill.

Listen now to the text for today with open hearts and minds to be filled a vision that astounds and blesses.

Revelation 21:1-8: 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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ 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;

⁴ 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.”

⁵ 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.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will

¹ Sermon draws in part from another sermon I preached on this text on 11/5/2000 (FN: Rev21-1.2000.doc)

be their God and they will be my children. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

What a big vision! It is not a vision of some distant future. Don't let the foolishness about reading the book of Revelation as almanac of what is going to happen in history get you. Revelation is not a large fortune cookie. It is a sermon to frightened, anxious, discouraged people of faith at the end of the first-century in present-day Turkey. They don't need an almanac of what will happen in the distant future. All of these interpretations that identify aspects of the book of Revelation with the new legislation about a national identification card rather than a state license or the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the like are worthless—at least they would be worthless to me if I were living in the first-century under the rule of the Roman Empire. None of you came today find out about things 19 centuries from now.

John's big vision is for frightened, anxious, discouraged people of faith...now. If you are a person of faith who is or has been frightened, anxious, or discouraged, then this vision is for you. There are wonderful details in this vision: no sea because that the source of chaos...no pain and no tears because God finally has no place for them...curiosity about a lake of fire and a second death...another time, and we will look at details. Here's our focus for today: the blessing is coming down. Instead of going up to heaven, heaven is coming down.

You may not know that the very architecture of this sanctuary was influenced by this vision. Gothic architecture sought to build sanctuaries that implied that heaven could come down...that is why they have great arches and great height. Gothic architecture was very intentional about lifting our eyes upward...to see heaven coming down. Each day in here is a heavenly day.

And not just the architecture...each week as we gather, the two pulpit chairs remind us this vision: Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. God encompasses our beginning and our ending. Every week these two chairs proclaim a heavenly vision among us.

This heavenly vision is not about what is going to be tacked on to the end of our days. John, the poet-seer, does not go up to heaven but rather sees heaven coming down. All too often we think heaven is just added on to our life of love, faith, and hope...a sort of bonus. No, heaven is what we already have had the opportunity to experience. In 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul speak of our life of faith, hope, especially love, he declares: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” He does not say we are blind and then we will see. No, now we see...we see a hazy sort of picture of what is...but we do see. We have a heavenly daze. Heaven is not out-of-sight...it is just out of focus.

It is similar to some poetic lines from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She used the story of Moses taking off his shoes before the burning bush in the presence of God and she wrote these lines of poetry:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.

The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.
[*Aurora Leigh*, bk. VII, 1.820]

Earth's crammed with heaven...but all we see are the blackberries and not the burning bushes. We need big visions because other visions will take the place of this big vision.

For example, I am continually amazed at how I, along with others, buy into the importance of seeing celebrities. Imagine with me: If I were to say that Bill Gates was going to be here tonight for talking about the future, computer buffs and those interested in the rich and famous would crowd in. If I were to say Tiger Woods was going to come in after the Wachovia golf match in Charlotte, sports fans who never darken the door the church would be lining up for attendance. If I were to say Kelly Clarkson, the first American Idol winner, will be here, our teenagers would suddenly find they have lots of friends who want to attend our church on Sunday evening. Celebrities are visions that we can take in.

But if I were to say God will be there—in our conversation tonight, in our worship, in our fellowship program, in our youth group—what then? If I say God is making a home with us, we get yawns. We stand in the treasure room of God, and all we have is a piccolo. We can't take in any more. We settle for smaller visions.

As many of you may know, the book of Revelation was written in a time when the survival of the church was truly in question. There was no luxury of being concerned about whether there was prayer in school or at sports event. There was no luxury of letting others take care of congregational life for you. There was no luxury of intermittent participation when it struck your fancy. There was grave concern about surviving and staying alive. It is into such a situation that the big vision comes.

In fact, what the dominant culture was saying to John's congregations was "Fit in." "Go along with things." The culture was saying: "Don't be so different." That's about what our culture is telling us today: "Be a Christian, but don't let it change you. Be a Christian but participate in the culture like everyone else. Eat, drink, be merry, overwork, over-indulge with the best of them."

In answer, the seer-poet John offers this vision...like a dream—contrasting images can be held side by side. Heaven is coming down...the new Jerusalem is coming down...and it is like a bride dressed for her wedding. A city...a bride...the two images are different and get laid on top of each other. Earlier in the book of Revelation we have been told about the preparation and adornment of the bride—it is the faithful and righteous deeds of those who follow Jesus (Rev. 19:8). Sometimes I find myself hard-pressed to name those actions of mine that are preparation and adornment of the bride as seen in John's vision. That is what John sees about the church: we are dressed up like a bride so that God will make a home with us—the trousseau, the bridal garments, the preparation is what we do now. So how are the preparations going?

I am reminded of Eric Liddell, a Scottish track star in the 1924 Olympics. With some dramatic license, a part of Eric Liddell's story is told in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. In the movie, he says: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure."

You may recall that he refused to run on Sunday, his Sabbath. He was favored to win an Olympic gold medal for his country and for himself. He passed up because he was convinced that it would not bring honor to God to run on the Sabbath.

Now I don't know about you, but my guess is that I would have found a way to rationalize my way out of such a decision. Something like: "Faith is more flexible." Or, "I'll observe the Sabbath on another day." Or, "My witness would be greater as Olympic champion versus a person who let down the team and my country."

Maybe it was because Eric Liddell had a bigger vision of life than just winning an Olympic gold medal. He was preparing the bridal garments when God would make a complete home with us. Incidentally, Liddell was given the chance to run in an Olympic event that was not his race later in those 1924 games. He set a world record in the event.

After the Olympics, he did not go home to bask in the light of fame. Instead he went to China as missionary. He, along with other British residents, was placed in an internment camp set up by the Japanese during their war with China. But there in the internment camp, Liddell continued to teach science and organize sporting events. He was known as "Uncle Eric" to all the children. As a relatively young man, he died of a brain tumor in that internment camp.

Liddell lived by a vision that was larger than making it through the day, larger than making a mortgage payment, larger than being popular, larger than taking care of his own needs.

What vision will we live by? We enter in the treasure room of the king this day. All we may have is a piccolo to fill. But here is the grace of God: we can keep coming back. Keep filling it up. God is making all things new. God is coming to make his home with us. The new Jerusalem is just beyond our physical sight. With a big vision, we can make those choices that prepare us for the great marriage feast as God makes God's home with us. Earth's crammed with heaven...and we are called to put on the clothes that are appropriate for the wedding feast. What are waiting for? Let's get dressed.