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Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
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Revelation 21:1-6 • Acts 11:1-18

Every journey of faith involves change. We all have times when God invites us to pause, and consider our lives and our ministry anew. Sometimes God speaks to us through our neighbors, or our experiences, when we least expect it. At other times, we know our hunger and our longings. We may seek out God's counsel in the midst of a problem or a question. It often takes prayerful persistence to seek God's will for our lives. Whether it comes as a sudden surprise, or as a long-sought goal – God sometimes gives people a dream or a vision for the future.

Our lessons today are filled with visions from God. Have you ever received such a vision? Or dreamed a dream that was a gift from God? Today the Sunday School children finished studying God calling Moses through the burning bush. The visions in both of our passages today probably took their seers by surprise. Our scriptures show us that such visions are a way that God instructs us, and invites us to new action in our lives.

In our first reading, from the book of *Acts*, Peter shared a vision that he received from God. The believers in Judea were questioning him about why he

made some recent choices. Peter explained by sharing the vision that he received from God. It would take a lot of time for us to unpack this vision. I'm not going to take the time to tease it all apart today. But Peter's experience helped to open him to new ways of understanding God. That led to new ways that he could live out his faith. In response to this vision, his ministry expanded to include people who were not already Jewish. God invited Peter to see that faith in the God of Israel was not only for Jews to worship. God reached out to all people through the gift of Jesus Christ. After Peter saw God's teaching, his ministry as an apostle was no longer only for Jews. In Christ, God would reach out to all people through Peter's ministry, as well. Peter's was a vision that guided the early church to open its arms to all people.

The entire book of *Revelation* is one, long vision. That's why the title of the book is singular – it is one revelation – not many revelations. Our reading from today comes near the end of the vision. Just as for Peter, the vision is from God, and something comes down from the sky. *Revelation's* seer beheld “a new heaven and a new earth.” (*Rev 21:1*) “[T]he holy city, the new Jerusalem” (*Rev 21:2*) is what comes down as a gift from God. For the early Christians, Jerusalem was still understood as a center of worship. Jerusalem held the Jewish temple, which was the center of

worship for Jews. In this waking dream, God recreates all of creation – earth and heaven.

God also recreates what worship is for the people. The new Jerusalem is brought to the people. The “loud voice from the throne” says, “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.” *(Rev 21:3)* This names for us what began in the birth and life, and resurrected life of Jesus Christ. God was revealed by his coming among us. Christ dwelled with our ancestors as a person. The risen Christ continues to dwell with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit, found especially in Christ’s church. The passage speaks in the future though, of the fullness of the healing and newness that will come. We know that we still experience sin and pain and death. Yet one day they will be gone. One day, all the brokenness in us and in our lives will be healed. All our tears will be wiped away forever. “[M]ourning and crying and pain will be no more.” *(Rev. 21:4)*

The voice then moves back to the present, after talking about the future. “See, I am making all things new.” *(Rev 21:5)* The one on the throne, God, speaks of a process that is happening in the present. Our world is becoming a new creation now. I keep seeing and hearing commercials for Pepsi’s current competition. “Refresh everything” is a competition to receive a grant to make the world a better

place. In this lesson, God essentially says, “I am refreshing everything!” God invites our eyes to be opened and see and participate in the new life in and around us. *Revelation* is a vision of renewed understanding of God’s work in the world. It’s a promise of full, satisfying, eternal life to all who believe in God’s revelation through Jesus Christ.

In scripture, the visions are gifts. Neither Peter nor the seer of *Revelation* have done anything to make themselves worthy of them. Their visions are: communications from God; guidance for life; gifts through faith in Christ. Both are guiding the seer toward the new creation that God wants to bring in them. In *Acts*, it was Peter’s new approach to people and his ministry. In *Revelation*, it was a new of seeing the world and God’s continuing creating and redeeming work in it.

I believe that this is a time for Emanuel’s to seek God’s vision for our life together. It is normal for congregations to reconsider their ministry when there has been a change in pastors, or a change in strong lay leadership. We also have other reasons. You will read in this month’s newsletter that Emanuel’s continues to face difficult financial situations. We welcome two new members today. We all know there are members whose faith lives have taken them to other Christian communities to worship and to serve.

Each week, we hear the Word reminding us of God’s love and care for us, and for all of creation. The good news proclaims how we have been brought into new life in Christ. We see how Jesus lived God’s love for the world in every moment of his 33 years here. Our congregation celebrates the Spirit’s blessing of our relationships. We are fed and sent out to be Christ’s bread for the world. In all these things, God is calling our congregation to a clearer witness – to shine Christ’s light brighter in our community.

In about one month, Emanuel’s will have a series of “cottage meetings.” These will be a series of gatherings where small groups will gather together. We may share what is going on in our lives, and in the life of the North Boroughs. We can consider how God invites people to renewed lives through us. We’ll try to untangle God’s vision for our congregation.

In the next month, I invite you to prepare for those conversations. Prayer is a very powerful thing, and it should happen when any journey begins. Whenever you say your prayers in the coming weeks, please pray for Emanuel’s. Pray that we may receive God’s vision for our congregation’s ministry at this time and place. Pray that God, whose Spirit is refreshing everything in our world, will reinvigorate and refresh us as members in the body of Christ. In the meantime, perhaps you will see a burning bush – or be the one to receive God’s vision or call for us somehow.

Let us pray.

God, you have called us to be here at Emanuel's, among your people. You have called us to receive your new creation among us, and to share that with others.

Pour your Holy Spirit upon us. Anoint us with Christ's love. Bless our congregation of disciples with a heart for your people and your gospel. Grant us a vision of how we may share you with our neighbors. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.