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*Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy*

SESSION SIX: May 18, 2010

## The Hope of Divine Comedy

### The Promised New Creation

*food for thought...*

"Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ's love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering that Love has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one."

—Frederick Buechner

"The church is the community that lives ahead of time, the people who say now what may one day be said by all, once God gets what God wants—'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'"

—William Willimon  
Who Will Be Saved?

"Dear Lord, let me be broken by the things that break the heart of God."

—Robert Pierce,  
founder of World Vision

"If the Kingdom of God is within you, then everywhere you go you should leave a little heaven behind. People will know you to be a heaven-leaver. You can learn to love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart because you're connected to a power and a grace greater than your ego."

—Cornel West,  
Hope on a Tightrope

### The Lamb at the End of the Story

Several surprising and wonderful things happen at the end of the Bible. One of them is a scene in Rev. 5 where an angel asks if there is anyone worthy to open the scroll in the heavenly throne room, and the answer comes that "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" is indeed worthy. We expect to see such a lion, but instead, there is a Lamb—and *only* a Lamb (who is this Lion figure, apparently). The Lamb is described as "standing as if it had been slaughtered" and yet is alive and victorious (Rev. 5:6), and the heavenly chorus sings about the Lamb:

*"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

Like the risen Jesus in the Gospel accounts, Christ as the Lamb figure in Revelation still wears the scars of death on a cross, even though he is alive again. The suffering of Jesus—indeed, God's own suffering—is not done away with, erased, or forgotten even at the end of time in the new creation, but rather is made precious, holy, and blessed. The image of the slain-but-triumphant Lamb offers us several insights as we look at God, suffering, and the promised future of the world.

- **Suffering is God's way of accomplishing victory.** In the end, God does not switch out the "lamb tactics" of suffering love and the cross and replace them with violent, domineering "lion tactics" in order to bring about his Reign. And the cross is neither forgotten nor undone at the end of history. God has taken on human suffering and endured suffering *alongside* of us, and *for* us in the cross of Jesus. So, rather than God keeping clear of all suffering, even in Revelation we are reminded of a God who takes on suffering *for* us and is able to redeem and overcome *through* it.
- **There is no "replacement Jesus."** As we had said in our discussion of the end of the book of Job (*where Job gets new children and prosperity*), there is really no such thing as a "replacement" child. The same is true with God's Son—the Jesus who rises on Easter and who reigns in Revelation is the same one who came through death. That means God does not get rid of the memory of the "lost" Jesus who died, nor does God make a fresh duplicate copy of Jesus to replace the crucified one. But the Risen Jesus is the Crucified Jesus, and the Victorious Lamb is the Slain Lamb. This tips God's hand as to what the "new creation" is like, and what we will be like as part of it. Rather than treating humans as interchangeable placeholders, God holds onto the real you and me, scars and all. The particularities that make us us are not lost, but redeemed.

## The Hope of Divine Comedy: The Promised New Creation

### The New Creation

Running throughout both the Old and New Testament is a recurring promise, like a melodic theme in a symphony, that God will at the last bring about a new beginning by making a whole new creation, a “new heavens and a new earth.” That promise is meant to be understood through the light of the Slain-but-Triumphant Lamb—in other words, the “new” creation is not about God giving up on the old creation and starting from scratch, but rather somehow holds on to this broken creation and mends it to make it like new. Take a look at these descriptions of the new creation from Isaiah and Revelation. What are recurring images, and what do these images say about our promised future?

- **Isaiah 25:6-9**—*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; <sup>8</sup>he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup>It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*
- **Isaiah 65:17-18, 24-25**—*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. <sup>18</sup>But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.... <sup>24</sup>Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. <sup>25</sup>The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*
- **Revelation 21:1-4**—*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. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘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; <sup>4</sup>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.’*

Notice here at least three things: (1) the promise of an end to the causes of suffering, with the sense that this is how God had intended for creation to be all along; (2) a change in the nature of the new creation to make such a world possible (like the idea of a world where wolves and lambs eat together); and then (3) God guarantees this new creation by God’s own presence in a fuller and deeper way than ever. It is not that the “new” creation is made out of better “stuff” so much as God’s own presence that makes the difference.

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### Knowing the Last Chapter from the Beginning

Although we are told about it only in snapshots, sketches, and metaphors, we have been told the end of the story already. As we have been saying from the beginning of this series, the Christian life is lived in the hope that God really will reign in perfection and completion at the last, or as Willimon says (on the front quotation), we live in the hope that “God will get what God wants” in the end. Knowing that our future is secure, and knowing that God is drawing all things toward that promised future of a mended, renewed creation, Christians can face present-moment sufferings differently than others might:

- **Honesty about the reality of suffering**—Knowing that death will be defeated and tears will be wiped away lets us be honest about the pain of death and tears now, rather than denying them.
  - **Suffering does not get the last word**—We believe that tragedy does not get to define us ultimately, but rather God gets the last word and final say over us, our worth, and our life.
  - **We learn to align our lives and loves with God’s.** There are things that break the heart of the God of the Bible. While we are promised that God will deal with them at the last, in the mean time, we choose to be aware of the realities that grieve God’s heart, and to let our lives be used in healing them.
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