

Do we want division to cease? (Revelation 21:1-6a)

## **It often works pretty well for us.**

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November 5, 2021

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What wonderful news, right?

No more God-absence! No more tears, death, mourning, or crying! No more pain! All the former things passed away and everything made new! Please God, now!

And no, I don't know what a "new heaven" might look like (I have not yet seen the old one), but hey, sounds great. And if it comes complete with a New Jerusalem, all dressed up and ready to wed, all the better.

Only, about the New Jerusalem, I wonder: Will there still be quarters in the holy city come down from heaven? If so, how is that new, really? And if not, how will the Muslims, Armenians, Jews, and Christians feel about it?

Put otherwise, does everyone really want to believe, with Bono and U2, in a kingdom come "where all the colors bleed into one?"

That is precisely the vision of the sermon known as Hebrews, as Jesper Svartvik discussed in [his recent Century essay](#). Svartvik hears an altar call inviting the hearer/reader of Hebrews to both embrace the hope and live into the vision of a "new and complete" that replaces the "old and partial."

Sadly, not everyone leaves church reborn after hearing a reading from Hebrews. Our cherished traditions are "old and partial"? Worn-out and unsuited for the new order of things? While some of us would acknowledge feeling that way, others . . . well,

they may want improved—kinder, gentler, purer—but new? Not so much. After all, the things that Revelation sees passing away are the very things that give us identity and purpose.

Many people, and many Christians, have grown comfortable with division. Yes, we plan and applaud the occasional, project-specific unities that reach beyond the walls of traditional separations. But the divisions work for us all the same, despite the sometimes tragic collateral.

Revelation 21 ends with the healing of the nations. Good news? Only, as Jesus asks the man at the pool, if we want to be healed.

The man at Bethsaida doesn't say yes or no, perhaps because without hope of healing, he has never given much thought to an "old things passed away" future. Most of us haven't either, have been as unable as he. Which is to say, I have no way to think about the universalizing promise of this passage, not least because I have long put my own mat by the pool. My imagination is both formed and delimited by the very past I say I'd gladly forsake.

The vision of Revelation, according to Craig Koester, is "marked, in part, by an *absence* of powers that oppose God and diminish life." But it is those very powers that give many of us our reason for waking, our outlines for preaching, our energy for marching. Adversaries and fears give us opportunities for battle, taxonomies for heroes and villains, a cause for loyalties (and, for some, royalties).

Speak peace? No we won't. No, we don't, even when the struggle for some diminishes some others and creates even more divisions.

John's vision is glorious, pastoral, comforting, and much to be desired: the end of weeping and mourning and death. The text is surprisingly prophetic, however: a reminder that, ready or not, there is coming a day when God will live among us, when our selfish attentions will be refocused and our lives reordered. John's is a call to get ready for we can't yet imagine what.

What we can imagine, though, is this: that the New Heaven, as Harry Emerson Fosdick said, is an acquired taste, not suited for those unsuited to peace rather than acrimony, or who worship self above all else.