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The Fifth Sunday of Easter
All Hallows Parish, South River
Davidsonville, MD
April 28, 2013

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

A new heaven, a new earth, a new holy city - the new Jerusalem.

This is the seventh vision of St. John the Divine who wrote the Book of Revelation. His focus here is our salvation.

When we take a closer look at what this new earth looks like, we find that it is drastically different from the one we know now. For in it, we are told, "the sea was no more."

For me, this image conjures up the recent NASA images from Mars, a planet which may have had bodies of water and even oceans before. But now, it is a red, dry and cold planet.

Life, as we currently understand it, relies on water in some form. How could a world with the sea or ocean be desirable? So in order to understand the vision of St. John, we need to know something about the mythic and symbolic character of the sea as he writes of it in the Book of Revelation.

For St. John, the disappearance of the sea is equivalent to the eternal confinement and punishment of the dragon (Satan); the disappearance of the sea is equivalent to the destruction of the beast - the antichrist, the false prophet; the disappearance of the sea is equivalent to the elimination of Death and Hades. In other words, the verse that "the sea was no more" implies that "Death would be no more," as the voice from the throne interpreted this vision for St. John.

In fact, the elimination of the sea symbolizes the complete victory of creation over chaos, life over death. (The New Jerome Bible Commentary, [NJB] 1015)

Friends, this symbolism is not that far-fetched for our imaginations. Have you ever heard of the advice to write down all the things that bother you on a

piece of paper, fold it and put it in a bottle, and throw it into the sea? This is similar to John's vision - God will gather all the baggage, sins and woes, of our lives into one place, the sea, and eliminate it from existence.

That's the idea of the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem. St. John wrote Revelation at a time when Christians were under harsh persecution, first by Nero, then by Diocletian. These words of hope were vital to the survival of his community, so that they might not lose heart and give up. His basic message is: it will get better; hang in there.

His message also rings true for us, in April of 2013. In the May (current) issue of Tidings, our editor, Gail Enright prefaced the prayers for the various victims of recent tragedies with the following:

"April is the cruelest month" wrote T. S. Eliot in *The Wasteland*. He was referring to disappointed expectations. For us in 2013, the multiple tragedies that struck in April certainly arose from human cruelty in Boston; human negligence in Bangladesh and in West, Texas; and nature's indifference in earthquake-shaken [Southwestern] China.

On top of that, we just obtained news that Barbara Rephann, a longtime parishioner and choir member who had moved to South Carolina, succumbed to a battle with cancer earlier this week.

It's at times like this we naturally yearn for a new heaven and a new earth - one in which there are no more tears, no more pain, no more tragedies, whether human-induced or natural. And some would turn to the One who made the heavens and earth for an answer. And sometimes, the more we think about it, the more confused we can get. God gives rain both to the good and the evil. God is all powerful. Yet, evil exists in the world..so on and so forth. Unfortunately, some may be tempted by such speculation to conclude that there is no God after all.

Quite the contrary, God is active in the midst of the sufferings of this world. Consider that on which our faith is built: a crucified Christ who triumphed over the power of death. God in Jesus Christ is not impervious to human suffering. Quite the opposite: Christ gave himself up and walked to Golgotha on our behalf. Our faith teaches us that the existence of human suffering and the

sufferings of other creatures in this world is a passing phenomenon. As the vision of St. John clearly spells out:

"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;
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."

If we look back about almost eight hundred years before St. John had his vision, the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed concerning the Lord God,

"For look, I am going to create new heavens and a new earth,
and the past will not be remembered and will come no more to mind. Rather
be joyful, be glad for ever at what I am creating,
for look, I am creating Jerusalem to be 'Joy'
and my people to be "Gladness." (Isaiah 65:17-18).

What can we make of the similarities between St. John's vision and Isaiah's prophecy? Is it that the Old Testament and the New Testament agree with each other? Maybe, but that's not it.

Could it have been that St. John knew Isaiah by heart and heard these similar words in his vision? Maybe, but I don't think we really know.

My brothers and sisters, I think the key here is that people of faith in all times and places handle the problem of the coexistence of good and evil in the world with the belief that God will vindicate the righteous in the end; that good will always triumph over evil; that life will conquer death.

It is with that conviction that we must carry on our mission in a world shaken by tragedies of all sorts. The world needs the healing balm of Gilead. The world needs to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which proclaims that love always wins. The world needs to hear the message of the new heaven and new earth.

Beloved, every time we gather in the name of the Church in worship and the breaking of bread, we follow the apostles' teaching and tradition as we await the new heaven and new earth. In our prayers, in our hearing the reading and preaching of the Word of God, and in our sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ, we follow Jesus' plea that "we all be one."

At the 10:30AM Holy Eucharist, many of our children will be making their First Holy Communion. They have all received instructions on the significance and meaning of this Sacred Meal. Some have been taking communion for some time, as our Church Canons require that one only be baptized in order to take communion. Some will be taking it for the first time in every sense of the word. But whether they will be taking communion for the first time overall or the first time after the formal instruction, their participation is equally important for the life of the Church.

They will join us, and countless saints before us and those who will come after us, to be ambassadors of the faith that has reshaped the world, the faith that has given countless people the hope where there is no hope, the life when there is no life, and the power to hang in there until God renews the face of the earth, until we see a new heaven and new earth.

With that hope, draw near with faith, my brothers and sisters, to the Table of the Savior of the world, give thanks, receive forgiveness, and let us look forward to that heavenly city - the New Jerusalem.

Amen.