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Date: May 21, 2017
Sermon Title: A Good Word About THE FUTURE
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Revelation 22:1-5

Revelation 22:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

At Bible study this week, we studied a little-known story. It happens right after Christmas. Jesus is born, and his proud family takes him to the great Temple in Jerusalem to thank God. And to their amazement, two old people come up to them, see the Baby Jesus, and declare, "Hooray, you're just what we're looking for! We've been waiting for you for ages!" They start praising God and showing off the Baby Jesus, and the old man says, "Now I can die in peace."

For him, the arrival of Jesus was all the proof he needed that the future was in good hands, or more specifically, God's hands. God kept his promise. God had sent the Messiah, and it didn't matter that the Messiah was a little baby *and* that his life would be tough. What mattered was that the future was secured.

Now, the old man was no man's fool. He actually looked right in Mary and Joseph's eyes and told them straight out, "Your kid is going to have a tough life, he's going to shake things up, shake people up, and some folks are not going to like it." "In fact," he says very bluntly, "your son's life is going to feel like a sword pointed at your heart." And yet, *and yet*, the old man, Simeon, and the old woman, Anna, looked at Jesus and knew the future was good.

That's my message for today: the future is good, the future is secure. And that should change our whole attitude toward the present.

Life is a paradox, isn't it? Remember the difference between contradiction and paradox? A contradiction is two things that cannot possibly both be true. You can't have a cold hot day. Or a mean but nice neighbor. Some things don't go together at all. Paradox is two things that shouldn't go together, but they do. Sweet-and-sour chicken. Or saying, "I am nobody." The Boston Celtics have a superstar, only 5'8", but they say he "plays tall." That's a paradox. Like being hopeful when life is crazy.

For me, a lot of it has to do with perspective. Are you a glass-half-full person or glass-half-empty? It's the same glass, the same amount of liquid. One person sees fullness, another person sees emptiness. I listened to the stock market reports on Wednesday, when it tanked 350 points. Very knowledgeable people said it was the worst day in ages. Other knowledgeable people said 2017 had been the best year in ages. They're both looking at the same numbers, but their perspectives are quite different.

My favorite story I've used a dozen times, but I love it, so here it is again. A couple had two sons, one an optimist, the other a pessimist. The parents take the kids to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist puts each boy in a room filled with manure, leaves them there for an hour. When the hour was up, they opened one door, the little pessimist is whimpering in the corner. "It smells in here!" They check on the other boy. He's busily digging through the manure with both hands, happy as can be. "With all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

To live in our world in May 2017 is to live in a room full of manure. And my guess is as much as that sounds like a political comment, just about every political side would agree—and not just in our country. It seems a fair statement that to live in our world in May 2017 is to live in a room full of manure. And the reality is that some folks think it stinks, and some folks are excited to find a pony. It's all in the perspective: glass half-full, glass half-empty; a room full of stink or a room full of ponies.

The Bible—and Christianity—tries to give us perspective on the future precisely to liberate us in the present. I would say when the Bible talks about the future, it has three points: No. 1, tomorrow: don't worry about it, don't stress about it, don't panic. Tomorrow is a finite thing. It will come, and it will go, and another one comes after that. The Book of Proverbs says, "Do not *boast* about tomorrow," and Jesus adds, "Do not *worry* about tomorrow," and the reason for both is that tomorrow can't be controlled. It can turn your boasting to embarrassment, and it can waste all your worry.

Look at the Mets. Two months ago the Mets were one of the best baseball teams with absolutely THE best pitching. Now they have no pitching, and they're in trouble. The boasting all winter didn't help, and worrying now won't help. Boasting about tomorrow is, by definition, boasting about something that hasn't happened. Never a good idea. And worry . . . well, worry is just plain unproductive. Sitting in a corner whining, complaining, lamenting, doesn't move you one step closer to success.

It's popular nowadays to be negative, but there's nothing new in that. Listen to what Shakespeare said about tomorrow in "Macbeth," Act V scene 5:

Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time . . . Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Poor Macbeth seems to have given up on the future.

The Bible isn't quite so pessimistic. The Bible is saying tomorrow is coming, that a fact, and you'd better find a better approach to it than boasting or worrying. So the second approach to the future is to pump us up with confidence. The Bible gives us Heaven, the ultimate tomorrow. And there are three parts to the Heaven stuff: first, Jesus will come back, a total affirmation that everything he stood for, everything we believed in, everything we try to be in his name—it's all worth it. Second, God is in control. Sure, the things that make our world so iffy: unstable leaders, unstable governments, unstable militaries, unstable economies, unstable policies, unstable decisions and decision-makers. And if you don't like the word "unstable," plug in "crazy" or "ineffective" or "ludicrous" or "tyrannical." And if you think I'm picking on one country or one administration, you're missing the whole point. The Bible is universal. It's about the grand scope of history.

We may be the center of *our* universe, but we are not *the* universe. The Bible doesn't know about Trump, Obama, Clinton, or whoever is next down the line. The Bible is about wisdom from above, applied to the manure down below. All that "iffiness" of "unstableness" or "craziness" has been around forever, wherever, no matter the system.

The point of Heaven, with God in control, is that the "iffiness" of bad leadership is ended. The values, the ideas, the virtues, the beliefs we have yearned to be true are finally triumphant. That's the second point of Biblical Heaven. And of course, the third emphasis of Heaven is that it is real, it is astounding, it is spectacular.

The Scripture that was read this morning is just a tiny glimpse of Heaven. Put everything the Bible says about Heaven together, it's way over the top, it defies description. It's all our best hopes multiplied by infinity! New life. Reunion with loved ones. Beauty. Grandeur. A display of God for which the word "awesome" was created. It's real. It awaits. You, my friends, win.

So now we come to the final part, why I feel so good about the future. If tomorrow is not worth worrying about, if Heaven is real, and worth whatever sacrifices you make, then you and I are set free to change the world, to fix it, help it, move it, save it . . . no matter what it takes. We are no longer afraid, intimidated, pessimistic, negative. Instead, we are confident, focused, bold.

We all know the New England Patriots lost the Super Bowl this year, right? They were behind by a million points in the third quarter. If you have half a brain like me, you turned it off and went to bed. I really did. But it turns out the Patriots, the players, they were fully 100 percent assured—on the sidelines, in the huddles, playing the game—assured, confident of the outcome. Someone said, "It was as if they knew they had already won." In fact, the Patriots' coach, Bill Belichick, gave an interview in April. He said, "It was funny, we didn't have control of the score, but we had . . . control of the game." (*Boston Globe*, April 14, 2017, p. D2)

Forgive that analogy, but that is the approach to life Jesus begs to have. We controlled the game. The process can be messy, tough, painful, dangerous. We are set free. Not from pain, not from opposition, not from ridicule or mockery. We are set free from losing. The Bible puts it better than I do: St. Paul wrote, "Our present sufferings, our momentary troubles, are *not worth* comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17) Jesus is even blunter "God will reward each person according to what we have done."

So . . . worry gets us nowhere, Heaven is real, the final outcome is excellent! And we get to live our lives fearlessly, boldly. It's time to *do*. We can stand up and be counted, we can resist any evil, we can put ourselves on the line for any cause, we can defy all odds, we can face being outvoted, unpopular, ostracized, depressed, or worse. Yes, or worse.

As I close, I urge us all to look beyond the myopia of today's news cycle. This sermon isn't about today or just today, it's for every day. Alida and I just returned from Vienna, where the events of the 20th century were front and center. I could have preached this sermon in Vienna throughout the 1900s. We just returned from Florence. I could have preached the sermon in Florence in the 1500s. I've been preaching since 1968. I could have preached it any Sunday since 1968. I have preached in some 3,000 places in an a dozen countries, and I have preached some version of this sermon every time. The

world is still the world. There is a lack of love, a lack of equality, a lack of peace, a lack of justice in lots of places everywhere near and far; every government, every administration, every political system. It's not just now. It's not just us. It is the world in which we live.

And frankly, it's full of manure, and yes, it really does stink. But by golly, it makes sense that with all this manure, there's surely a pony in here somewhere. So we keep digging. The future is good. We've already won. The other team just doesn't know it yet.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, No. 705, appropriately titled, "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" (also known as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"):

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are
stored;
he has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
his truth is marching on.*

*Refrain:
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
he is sifting out all human hearts before his judgment seat;
O be swift, my soul, to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on. [Refrain]*

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
as he died to make us holy, let us die to make all free,
while God is marching on. [Refrain]*