

SERMON TITLE: “Message in a Bottle”
TEXT: Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-5
PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church
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INTRODUCTION

As James mentioned last Sunday, we have finished our sermon series on 2 Corinthians. I think that one of the things we saw throughout our time spent in this letter is that the church in Corinth was a regular church with regular problems and challenges. Paul’s letters (to the Corinthians, as well as to the other churches he wrote to) are all about figuring out how following Jesus works in real life, with all of the ups and downs that real life contains.

So we’re in a bit of a transition time between, as far as sermons go. Next week is Mother’s Day, and the week after that we will be starting a short series on the Psalms. So I was thinking about how to bridge the gap between a very pragmatic series on what kingdom living looks like in the real, messy world of first century Corinth (or twenty-first century Nanaimo!) with a series on the language of prayer and worship.

I don’t know about you, but I think that every once in a while we need a vision of the grand vision of the life of faith—the hope to which we are called. I need these reminders of the big picture because understanding the big picture helps us live more faithfully and effectively in the “little pictures” of our lives as individuals and as a community.

Revelation 21-22 gives us that grand vision. And we’ll get there. But I’m going to begin somewhere else.

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ISLAND PARADISE

Early this week I got a surprise phone call. One of my mentors, who recently accepted a call to pastor our sister MB church in Victoria, had arrived on the Island. He was up in Nanaimo purchasing a vehicle and wanted to do lunch.

This is a couple that has been an important part of our lives, ever since we were teenagers. Ken was our youth pastor in Coaldale, AB. He was also our pastor in Vancouver when we were going to Regent from 2005-2008. He and Yvonne have always been great mentors and friends to both Naomi and I and we were very excited to hear that they are moving to the Island.

So, over the course of lunch, talk inevitably turned to life and ministry and what it looks like on Vancouver Island.

Ken is marveling at the sheer beauty of the Island. Of course, Vancouver is pretty as well, but perhaps it is a bit easier to get lost in the concrete jungle that is urban life. Now, they find themselves living in a quiet little home in Brentwood Bay, with a pleasant twenty-minute bike ride to the church. He sees people selling eggs and organic produce on his “commute.” They are a ten-minute walk from the ocean. For someone emerging from 14 years in the hustle and bustle of life in Vancouver, it is an idyllic setting, and they are loving it!

So they are noticing or at least being *reminded* that Vancouver Island is a very *beautiful* place; they are also noticing what a *secular* place it is. Of course, coming from Vancouver this isn’t exactly a new phenomenon for him, but moving to a new context has made him notice it in a new way. People don’t seem to be very interested in organized religion over here!

I did some snooping around on Stats Canada’s website this week and found the hard evidence. 36% of British Columbians are religious “nones.” They have no religious Affiliation. And there are even more “nones” in greater Vancouver and Vancouver Island (around 42%).

While people claim to be interested in “spirituality” and all kinds of other options, Vancouver and Vancouver Island are the most secular places in Canada.

So my pastor friend and I were talking about this, and he offered the following theory:

I think that the beauty of this region works against people thinking about God and religion and church. There’s too much affluence and natural beauty. Why go to church when you can go kayaking or windsurfing in the ocean, or strolling on a beach, or skiing in the mountains, or wandering through some old-growth forests?

Why would anyone need God or church when life is just too darn pretty nice out here on the Island?

I found myself thinking about our conversation often over the last couple of days. Was my friend right? Do we live in a place that is *too nice* for God? Of course there are churches over here, and committed Christians, which is all very good. But does the “niceness” of our environment make believing in and following God more difficult?

I wasn’t so sure. One of the unpleasant implications of Ken’s argument *seemed* to be that the believability of God or the attractiveness of religion was directly related to the pleasantness of our surroundings. It’s easier to believe in/follow God when things are ugly or miserable, when we are living in harsh climates or barren prairies, when we don’t have a wide array of recreational opportunities, etc. If our Island is too nice for us to think about God, then what do we do? Go somewhere where it’s not nice? Seek out misery?

Do we only need God when things aren't the way we want them to be? I wasn't altogether comfortable with the implications of the argument.

I think that our view of God and the world and our place in it should be big and wide enough to embrace the good and the bad. The beauty of our Island should spur us on in gratitude and praise for its Creator. We should be able to thank God for kayaking and skiing and oceans and forests. Natural beauty and wonder shouldn't *compete* with God for our attention—it should enhance our love for God!

But, clearly, it doesn't. At least not always. Not 36% (or more) of the time!

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MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

So I was thinking about God and life on our island and how they were related as I was snooping around on my bookshelf this week. I came across a story about another Island. This one comes from a book by Walker Percy called, *The Message in the Bottle*. It goes like this:

There is a man who finds himself castaway on the shore of a remote island civilization. He is a special kind of castaway. He has lost his memory in the shipwreck and has no recollection of where he came from or who he is. All he knows is that one day he finds himself cast up on a beach. But it is a pleasant place, and he soon discovers that the island is inhabited. Indeed, it turns out that the islanders have a remarkable culture with highly developed social institutions, a good university, first-class science, a flourishing industry and art. The castaway is warmly received. Being a resourceful fellow, he makes the best of the situation, gets a job, builds a house, finds a wife, raises a family, goes to night school, and enjoys the local arts of cinema, music, and literature. He becomes, as the phrase goes, a useful member of the community.

The castaway, who by now is quite well educated and curious about the world, forms the habit of taking a walk on the beach each morning. After doing this for a while, he begins to regularly come upon bottles that have been washed up by the waves. The bottles are tightly corked and each one contains a single piece of paper with a single sentence written on it.

These messages are very diverse and appear to be random statements. Some say basic statements of fact like "Chicago, a city, is on Lake Michigan" or "2+2=4" or "lead melts at 330 degrees." Others are a bit more abstract and peculiar, like "truth is beauty."

Yet he finds that all of these messages, while occasionally useful, have nothing to say about the most important questions he has:

- "Who am I?"

- "How did I get here?"
- "What is my fate?"
- "What can I hope for?"
- "How should I live?"

All the messages in the world that explain the mechanics of life on the island, or even provide news from other places are of no use to this man when it comes to these questions.

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So what does Walker Percy's castaway have to do with my conversation with Ken or, more importantly, with the book of Revelation?

¹ Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

⁶ He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life."

For those who are familiar with the book of Revelation, you will know that there's *another* island involved in our story!

John is writing from a prison cell on the Island of Patmos. He had been sent there by the Roman emperor Domitian during his persecution of the early church. He is writing during a dark time for the infant church. He is writing to churches throughout Asia to encourage them to hold fast to the truth, to persevere, to take heart, to keep the faith, to keep on living out the message of the Kingdom of God.

In a way, he is bringing them a message in a bottle.

He has seen a vision. Jesus has revealed himself to John! He has shown him strange and beautiful things. The message in the bottle has told John, sitting on his island, about how the story ends.

And what does the message say? It says that Jesus is gonna win! It says that the old order of things is passing away. It says that one day God is going to dwell among his people.

It says that one day Christ's church is going to be as beautiful as a bride. No more fighting about theology, no more disputes about doctrine, no more personality conflicts. Our theology will be shown for the pale imitation of the real thing that it is when God himself dwells among us!

It says that one day there will be no more tears or mourning or death.

It says that the God we serve is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, and that he can be trusted with the future—with the future of the world, with your future, and my future.

It says that no matter how bad things might look—no matter if the Emperor is snuffing out Christian lives like there's no tomorrow, no matter how the little church is persecuted and ridiculed, no matter how hard (or easy) it is to believe that Jesus is gonna win, it's true. News has come from across the sea, and it is good news indeed!

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WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE MESSAGE?

As always, the “so what?” question remains. What do the stories represented by the three Islands—our Island of peace and beauty and affluence, John's island of imprisonment and persecution, and Walker Percy's island of restless contentment—mean for your life or for mine?

It's great to know how the story ends, but what do we do on the island in the meantime?

I want to draw THREE conclusions:

1. We need to remember that just like the man in Walker Percy's story, we are castaways, no matter how “nice” (or how miserable, for that matter) life on the island is

We need to pay attention to our “homesickness.”

Despite the current mantra of living in the moment (summarized by an ad for a certain beverage whose slogan is—“it's all about now”), we all know this isn't true, if we stop to think about it for even a few minutes.

No matter how beautiful our Island is, we all get these reminders that we are castaways, that we need good news of rescue from across the sea. A loved one dies. Depression sets in. Addictions take over someone close to us. The longings we have for security and love and permanence are not me here. Our bodies begin to betray us, in tiny little increments. We get reminders that we're not going to be around forever.

And ultimately, of course, we all die.

A comfortable life in a beautiful place can push the unpleasant realities of life into the background for a while—maybe even for a long while. But not forever. Deep in our bones, we know that we were created for eternity, and that our hearts long for what we were made for. Augustine famously set that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” We know that we were made for life, not death!

No matter how nice our island is, we are castaways and we must not forget this. Which leads to...

2. We need to realize that news of our rescue must come to us as genuine news from across the sea

We cannot think or analyze our way to rescue. In Percy’s story, the man became quite good at analyzing his environment, and learning about it, exploring it, and enjoying it. And this was all very good. But it didn’t address the biggest questions he had. Those answers had to come from somewhere beyond the island.

News of how God has rescued us cannot be found just by looking at the Island. There is no amount of observing our world, no scientific explorations of nature or anything like that that could ever produce the message that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to save his people! We can’t “figure it out” or “discover it through our research” or anything like that. It’s good to figure things out and to research things, but when it comes to the big questions, we need to hear from the outside. We need to hear from God. We need Revelation.

I think this is one of the biggest problems we “sophisticated” moderns have. We are too proud to accept that the most important news that we will ever receive has to be *accepted* rather than *discovered* by us. It is an offense to our pride and our self-sufficiency! If news like that was so important, why would God entrust it to a bunch of first century fishermen and tax-collectors who didn’t have our accurate means of information transmission?!

But accept it we must. We must understand our situation and we must be open to hearing the message in the bottle.

And we must be willing to accept it and obey it. We must trust the message.

Those of you who have your bibles open will have noticed that Revelation 21 doesn’t end at verse 6. What follows verse 6 is a rather stern warning that those who do not pay attention to the message, those who go on living in ways that contradict God’s plan for life, will be separated from him.

There is a lot at stake! The choices we make about what we will do with the message matters.

3. We need to realize (and celebrate) that the message in the bottle is not about getting off the island!

Most often, we think of the castaway as someone whose main goal is rescue and that this involves one day getting *off* the island. And this is how many have interpreted the Christian hope. Our main home is elsewhere—heaven.

But this is not what we see in Revelation. The message in the bottle tells of a different kind of rescue—one that involves the island itself!

REVELATION 22:1-5:

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Our texts this morning show us that there will continuity between the good things on our island and the new creation God is bringing.

The book of Revelation uses images of water and trees and leaves and fruit and cities and streets and the sun. We're not going to float up into the clouds like a Philadelphia cream cheese commercial! The future we await is one of incredible beauty of which our earth is just a foretaste!

There is a well-loved hymn called “this earth is not my home.” I’m just passing through. There is a sense in which this hymn is rights. Our deepest hopes and longings as human beings can never be met here on this earth as it is.

But there is also a sense in which the hymn is misleading, because this earth *is* our home. We see this most clearly in Genesis 1-2. God made it, he made us for it, he called animals and plants and rivers and forests and strawberries, and everything else that delights and amazes us, *good*. He put us into the world and called us *very good*. We were made for the earth and the earth for us. Our sin has defaced and damaged this goodness, but it has not destroyed it entirely.

And God has not given up on it! The island is not a place to be *escaped*; rather, it is a place to be *redeemed*, and made *new*.

As Darrell Johnson says in his commentary on the book of Revelation, “it says that God is making *all things new*, not *all new things*. It’s amazing the importance of rearranging those few words!

Just like God is making all things new in the big picture, he is also making his followers—you and me—new as well.

We are loved.

As followers of Jesus, we are part of the new creation. We are given the freedom and the opportunity to learn how to be new creations in our own skin. God takes us and remakes us as we are—we don’t have to alter our entire personality in order to be a new creation. “All things new” not “all new things.”

And one day, our redemption will be complete. Everything we do in the present is leading to the day when God’s name and his image will be so deeply imprinted within us that it cannot be defaced or damaged anymore, when there will be only light and no darkness, and where we will reign with Christ.

This is the grand hope of the Christian faith. This is why we do what we do, this is why we read Paul’s letters about Christian living, this is why we pray and worship and serve and give, this is why we have budgets and plans and conferences, this is why we are always trying to learn how to grow in love for God and for each other.

May God help us to be grateful, obedient, faithful, and joyful castaways on this island.

Amen.



240 Sending

L: We go now with faith,
trusting God's Spirit to guide us;

P: We go now with hope,
waiting for the fullness of Christ's reign.

L: We go now with love,
resting in God's care and the care of God's people.

*All: We go out with joy:
to listen and speak,
to sing and suffer,
to proclaim good news,
and give glory to God.*

241 Benediction

Go into the world and do what the Lord requires:
living with kindness and justice,
walking your path humbly, with God.

Then you will find yourselves blessed.

Know that yours is the kingdom of heaven,
yours the strength and mercy of God,
yours all the blessings given to God's beloved children. Amen.