

December 2, 2012
First Sunday in Advent

Advent season file
(Series C)

Revelation 21:2-4

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

ADVENT CASTAWAY

Voice on the edge of revelation – old man John the Apostle

Twelve years ago (*in December 2000*) a film was released in Hollywood that was essentially a one-man show. Many were skeptical about the story of a workaholic FedEx inspector, including FedEx at first, until the lead role was played by actor *Tom Hanks*. In the film he becomes Chuck Nolan, a man driven by his own hectic schedule and destined to survive a terrible plane crash, only to be stranded on a remote Pacific island for over four years as the *Cast Away*. I think my wife has seen it about 155 times, which is roughly 12 times per year – a conservative estimate for one on her favorite list. She has most of the script memorized, including the part that made millions for a volleyball company after winning the Best Inanimate Object Award – Wilson!

Twenty centuries ago, an old man was given a vision near the end of his life. He was the only surviving disciple from the original group of twelve selected and sent out by the Lord Jesus himself. This disciple was apparently his favorite, called the beloved; he was one of the Zebedee brothers, a fisherman, and his name was John. At the age of 95 it would be an understatement to say he had seen it all, and I am sure that when he retired into his cave on the island of Patmos just off the west coast of Turkey, or Asia Minor, in the Aegean Sea, he wasn't planning on seeing a heavenly vision of the church, either. But that's exactly what happened to this aging voice on the edge of revelation called the --

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Thrown out of society by the Roman emperor for preaching the Gospel, left alone without friends or resources like a plane crash survivor stranded on a south sea island, John the beloved Apostle saw something absolutely glorious! And then, he heard a loud penetrating voice explain the meaning in metaphorical words. The church, the one holy Christian church, the whole company of true believers known only to God, proceeded like a beautiful bride down the center aisle on her wedding day. She was perfect! Her gown was dazzling white, with no spots, no wrinkles, nothing out of place. Everything was the way it was supposed to be – even better than anyone imagined, including the --

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The image that John saw so long ago is hard for us to see. We have to take his word for it. We have to adjust our eyes to the Light. We have to make time to understand it because our attention spans have been programmed by television to last only a few minutes before another commercial. If the message he intends to send us isn't clear or to the point, there's a good chance we won't get it. And even if we do, we may not like it, reject it, or just throw it away.

There is a lot going on in our world. The church is just one thing. But that's not the problem. The problem is how our consumerist culture is shaping our image of the church. For example,

- Church isn't a worship center, it is a convenience store. People use the church for whatever they want and whenever they want it for their own good. It is more like a spiritual health club designed and driven by self-improvement programs.

- Church isn't a witness center, either; it's more like a witness protection agency that takes care of itself in order to survive and keep the faith franchise open for business.
- Church isn't a beautiful bride adorned for her husband; she's more like a bridezilla who thinks everybody should kiss her feet and do everything she wants to make herself a bride.

Unfortunately, the church doesn't work like a self-serve check-out stand. John's vision of the church isn't just about me! It's about people, other people, millions and millions of other believers redeemed and loved to be the bride of Christ. He pushes the zoom in button, and the closer he gets, the more we see the one responsible for the vision of the bride in the first place. The loud voice is definitely on the edge of revelation! Now, we can see and hear why we need this message from the --

ADVENT CASTAWAY.

Self-help programs may have a place in the book store, but the church has much more to offer when it comes out of its cave in order to serve others. Listen to the loud voice and move out into a brand new world of sacrifice and service for the sake of Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. He has made us his bride. His life, death, and resurrection have sealed the deal, the saving plan designed and delivered by God who not only wants to be with us – why is beyond me – and wants us to be with him! He loves us. He understands how we feel when people we love get sick and die. He knows the hurt, the pain, the sorrow, and the agony of defeat. He has been there. That's why he died. That's why he calls you his own. That's why he sends this message through the --

ADVENT CASTAWAY.

Look carefully. Catch this vision.

A pastor once saw a vision of this bride. She didn't give orders from her room to be served. She wasn't able to do that sort of thing. She was completely helpless in a hospital room with tubes, wires, and life-support monitors everywhere. Her daughter went to her and stood next to the bed of her unresponsive mother. Pulling back the sheets, she began to anoint her mom's legs with soothing, expensive lotion. It was more than she could afford, but it was her gift. Her own kids had given it to her for Mother's Day because she never got anything for herself. Now she was giving it to her mother. In a coma, she wouldn't know the difference. But the pastor did. What he saw and heard that day was a vision of the church, a beautiful bride not using God for herself, but alive and loving on the edge of a new creation in a new heaven and a new earth. There in that room was the bride of Christ, dying and living forgiven, in an eternal moment of sacrificial love.

John the beloved Apostle could have stayed in his cave; bundled in his own memories of discipleship. He certainly had a lot of adventures with the Lord and Savior of all creation, the Word made flesh, the Light of the world who came to be with us and save us from our sins. At his age, who could blame him? Being in exile guaranteed only one thing – seclusion, for remembering all his achievements in the church. But John isn't finished. He is still on the edge of revelation, still looking and listening for his next opportunity to serve the Lord.

John cannot save the church with this vision. Neither can we. Like so many of the churches he visited and we have joined, people will continue to abandon the ranks of the redeemed (2:4), sometimes right after promising to remain faithful. Others will entertain false teaching (2:9) and promote the wrong ideas about church. Some will get entangled into relationships (2:14) less than pleasing to God. Many will do nothing; they just tolerate evil (2:20). Too many people rest on their religious laurels (3:1). Only those loved by Christ will be recognized (3:9). A few will think being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, is a virtue much needed in the church (3:16). But God will spit them out of his mouth! Do any of these things sound familiar? We will never save the church. Our programs will never make her do anything, much less keep her from dying. Only the Lord himself can keep us together, alive and active, living forgiven by grace through faith on account of him and what he has already done to make us his bride.

A pastor caught the vision of this bride. It would probably be more accurate to say he heard it every time he visited the local nursing home. But it took a while for him to get it because he really didn't like going there – it was a dreadful place, a necessary social evil someone said. Who would want to die in such a place? But there he was, standing on the cold linoleum floors, walking past white hospital walls, noting the room numbers for the one that belonged to his parishioner. Making his way through a dozen wheelchairs cluttering the hallway, he tried in vain to ignore the incessant shouting of one old man, "I got your six!" (repeat) Nobody seemed to care about what he kept saying over and over again. When the minister reached the right room, he noticed the bed was empty. During the night MS had claimed another patient. As he turned to confirm the news at the front desk, he heard the same cry, which suddenly sounded more like a cheer at a pep rally back in high school, "I got your six."

Christ has our six! He is our back-up and our only pick-up on the Last Day. In truth, he has every number. He knows who we are and where we belong. And he has done everything necessary to save us from our sins, which includes our reluctance to be his bride even in a nursing home.

Catch the vision on the edge of revelation. Look and listen to John the beloved --
ADVENT CASTAWAY.

In Jesus' Name,
A M E N

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