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Moving Mountains: Mount of Judgment Revelation 21:1-14

This is our last sermon in the “Moving Mountains” series. Did you catch the mountain in this passage? It’s almost hidden there in verse 10 because the passage isn’t really about a mountain—and it isn’t exactly about the New Jerusalem or the lake of fire. This passage is about how everything and everyone, everywhere and “every-when” will wind up. John, the author of the Book of Revelation, says that an angel took him in a vision up to a high mountain to show him the end, the outcome, of all people and all acts and words and thoughts—everything.

Now, who cares about stuff like that? Here’s why it matters: if you knew where everything was going to end up, would it make any difference in how you live—how you treat other people, how you do business, what you do with money and possessions, whether you hold onto life for dear life or live bravely and joyfully—would it make any difference in what you believe and bet your life on and what you don’t? Of course, maybe it **doesn’t** matter how we live, if we’re all going to wind up in the same place anyway. As Pastor Mark said recently, lots of people in our culture are very fond of assuring us that all roads end up at the same place. It’s as though we are all climbing up a mountain; some climb up this side and some that side, some take this route and some another route, but in the end we’ll all end up in exactly the same place—the top. Now here’s a twist on that shallow thought that I find very interesting. The Bible *almost* agrees with our culture: the Bible says whatever road we take in life, whatever we believe or don’t believe, whatever we do or don’t do, whether we are good or bad, loving or beastly, we are all indeed going to wind up at exactly the same place: at the feet of the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus.

That’s because Jesus is both the beginning *and* the end. Jesus is the alpha and the omega—the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. When you’ve got the A to Z of things, you’ve got it all. Nothing is more first than the eternal Son of God, nothing is more last. Nothing is more complete than the risen Christ Jesus, and there is nothing not subsumed, defined by or included, under how real and true and good and beautiful He is. Apart from Him nothing at all would exist. And, apart from Him everything hangs in the air waiting for its conclusion—all good and all evil just hang waiting for the conclusion and meaning He gives to it in His own person, His own self.

One commentator on this passage said that life lived in this world is like a V7 chord (that’s pronounced five-seven, for those reading this sermon). You may not have

had any musical training, and you may not know that musicians have numbers for the chords they play. But I'll bet almost everyone here knows what a V7 chord is anyway, because it's something you can *feel* in music. Here's a little audio help. This chord is the I (one) chord—say C. That sets the key for us. Then comes the IV chord (F), and then the V (G) and this is the V7 (G7). Listen (leave things hanging on the V7 chord). Does that finish things? No. It just hangs there. You want it to finish—to *resolve* as musicians say. What if I play it louder and slower does that make us want to end there? Is that better? No, we want the music to resolve. And guess what? It resolves back to where it began (play C).

That's the way things are in this universe. They begin with the Eternal Son of God—and they will resolve or end in Jesus the crucified, risen Son of God, too. All the sin, hurt, brokenness of life are like that V7 chord. They leave us hanging and unresolved. They long to go somewhere, they just beg for resolution. Emptiness longs to be filled. Sorrow longs for comfort. Evil and cruelty cry out for justice to be done. Sin and brokenness long for redemption. Deadness longs to be raised to new life.

And all of it, and all of us, will wind up in the same place: at the feet of Jesus who is and was and is to come; He will be the answer to all things good and evil, beautiful and ugly. That's what John saw when the angel took him to the high mountain. All of it, and all of us, are going to wind up resolved/brought to conclusion by Jesus—either in grace or judgment. Let's look at the judgment part—evil and the lake of fire and the second death—before we look at how the New Jerusalem and heaven are God's resolution to the world's lostness.

Evil has consequences: *eternal* consequences and consequences *here and now*. Let's begin with eternal consequences, since that's what we're most used to talking about in church. All the stuff in verse 8 of our passage has consequences: those too cowardly to stand up for their faith in Christ and what Jesus says is right, all unbelief, sexual immorality, witchcraft, idolatry, murder and (just in case we thought we were going to get off with good behavior about "big" sins), lying. All of those things have eternal consequences. That's what the lake of fire and the second death are all about. Whatever you take these images to mean—whether you enjoy taking them literally or are relieved to take them symbolically—they are clear indications that good and evil are not the same. They are different, and they have different outcomes, different destinies. Evil is real and its destiny is frightening. God will not leave sin, evil, oppression and injustice unresolved, hanging in the air waiting for an answer. If you find that a bit harsh on God's part, consider this: there is something deep in each of us that cries out for justice to be done. We want crooks, murderers, rapists and thieves to be punished. What's tough is that we find ourselves included with them on the list of sinners, one way or another, in every listing of sins in the Bible.

Now, these things not only have eternal consequences, they also have historical consequences, too—consequences here and now. Let's talk about that for a bit.

It's important for us to know that God has taken sides *in history* against the wicked, the cruel and the forces of death opposed to God and his love. The whole book of Revelation is about that. Here's an example from our own history. The founding fathers of our nation compromised about slavery in order to form this nation. Their compromise with that sinful economic order led to the most costly war in America's history—650,000 lives lost in the Civil War and slavery was at the heart of it. Abraham Lincoln believed the nation was paying a fearful price for the sin of slavery. In his second inaugural address he said, "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's (i.e., the slaveholder's) 250 years of unrequited (or "unpaid for") toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" Yes. God is true and righteous and evil is real and costly. God is opposed to it, and it has consequences in this life for nations and for people, some right away and some later. Listen, beloved, there are no "victimless" sins, and there is nothing that we do in "private" that does not have consequences *in this life* for others. The Civil War poet James Russell Lowell, said, "They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin." He was right: the Founding Fathers didn't pay the price of their compromise with the sin of slavery—but their grandchildren did, and so did the slaves, and so are we as we struggle to overcome racism. *Every* sin has consequences here and now for others—whether we did it right out in front of everyone or imagined that we were doing it in private.

To leave our nation's history and get closer to home: do we think the bad language we use in front of our children will have no consequences for them and for this society? Do we think what we look at on a computer screen has no consequences for others? Do we imagine that being enthusiastic participants in the consumerism of this nation is without consequences for our children and for the rest of the world? Listen, we tend to like feeling guilty about some kinds of sins, and we tend to believe that what Jesus' blood on the cross has saved us from are the things we feel guilty about. But here is the scary truth: if Jesus' blood doesn't cover hundreds of things we never feel guilty about, things we think are just fine and oughta be just fine with Him, we're going to wind up in the second death, not the New Jerusalem. If you don't like hearing this, if some of it sounds socially liberal and some of it sounds too conservative for your taste, go home and read Matthew 25: 31-46 again. If you think you've been good and don't need Jesus to redeem and forgive you, go home and read the Sermon on the Mount again (Matthew chapters 3-5). If you think sin is all about "those" people whose sins are really *serious*, unlike your small minor sins, read the last paragraph of Romans chapter 1 (verses 28-32), and you'll find yourself in the same boat... with them and with me. Everything not redeemed by the blood of Jesus will be judged. That is the persistent message throughout scripture.

Now, here's the thing. The sermon title is, "Mount of Judgment" so I've taken that seriously—especially because we live in a society that doesn't take it seriously because it doesn't like it. But, most of what John saw from the high mountain the angel took him to wasn't judgment of sin and sinners. Most of what John saw was the salvation of those redeemed by Jesus. The New Jerusalem, the Holy City, heaven, is the resolution for those who belong to Jesus, who have been redeemed by His blood—that's 13 of our 14 verses. So, let's talk about the New Jerusalem for a bit and see how it is also God's resolution of everything in Christ.

It's interesting that the image of heaven is a city, don't you think? When we want to "get away from it all" isn't it usually the city we try to get away from? Humanity began in a garden, after all, and since our sin had the consequence of us being thrown out of the garden, wouldn't it make sense for our salvation to be restored to a garden, not a city? In Genesis we read that the first city was built by Cain the first murderer, and the second city was Babel with a tower built by arrogant sinners trying to reach up to heaven. The Bible describes Babylon and Rome as cities that fill the world with idolatry and filth, and even Jerusalem is a city that kills the prophets and rejects the Messiah. So, how can the resolution to human rebellion and sin possibly be a city? But, there it is in John's vision: the New Jerusalem.

Why is that, do you think? It's partly because it is the city that needs redeeming: its godless arrogance, its frightening violence, its impersonal way of dealing with people, its desperate luxuries, the dreadful way it shapes how people think and live—they all need resolving. So, the last word, the redeeming word, is a new city. A city that glorifies and loves God, that shapes people to live God's way, a city that uses everything for good—wealth, possessions and beauty. God's solution is not destruction but redemption.

John's vision of the New Jerusalem is rich in images—though some of them are a bit odd. He's using picture language—language that appeals more to our imaginations than to our intellects—in order to break through our ordinary ways of thinking. So, he tells us that the walls and foundations of the city are all precious jewels and the streets are pure gold—gold so pure it is transparent. Our passage is where the famous image of the "pearly gates" comes from—that image that begins so many bad jokes. The city itself is a cube of vast proportions. It is 1,500 miles long, 1,500 miles wide and 1,500 miles high. That's a city that would stretch from New York City almost to London across the Atlantic Ocean. It's 3,375,000,000 (that's three *billion*) cubic miles. By comparison the wealth, beauty, size of every human city shrinks into cute insignificance before the beauty and vastness of the heavenly city.

Part of the message is that this is a **big** city! So, it's clear, isn't it, that anyone who *wants* to may come into this vast city—there's room for everyone. Heaven is not a club for the better people, not the final destiny for a tiny number of the elect. It is a place for a vast population of people—more than could ever be counted.

All of this world's dissonances, all the discomfort of this world's V7 chords, are resolved in this city. Here our questions and doubts about God and God's ways are answered, for here we will see God face to face. There is no need for any temples or churches, because everywhere you go and everyone you meet is filled with the presence and glory of God. At long last our questions about why bad things happen to good people will be resolved. At last the loss we've felt over the death of a child, or of a marriage, will be resolved as God personally wipes away every tear from our eyes, and forever abolishes death and pain and sorrow. There will be no more darkness. No more fear of what may be lurking in the dark (robbers, goblins or disasters). No more dark to do dark things in! Everything will be visible, lit up, by the light of the Lamb of God, the risen, exalted Jesus of Nazareth, Eternal Son come from the Father.

It's crucial to note that this city is not the result of human effort, not even the efforts of the saints. We don't build this city. We don't reach up to heaven. This is a city that comes down out of heaven from God—it is entirely the creation and gift of a sovereign and loving God.

So, how does one get into this city? The answer is that the city is wide open. There are twelve gates to the city, not just one. Twelve is the number of fullness in the Bible—and here it means that there is not just one way into the city but a fullness of ways. Before you get all excited about universalism or our culture's view that all roads lead to the same place, please notice that every way into the city is through the gate of God's people Israel and is built on the foundation of the apostles' witness to Jesus Christ.

As beautiful and roomy as this city is, as easy as it is to enter it, this city will not be what everyone wants. Those who really want there to be darkness to hide the sin, pride and greed they enjoy so much may not find it their kind of place. Those who hate having any limitations on what they do won't like being in this city at all. This city is *God's* city, and in it God's will is done. There will be lots of sinners in the city, of course. But they'll be *repentant* sinners whose dirty clothes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and made white by that blood. Get it? It's an oxymoron in a way: the blood of Jesus makes us white as snow, all our sin and guilt washed clean. If you find that a gross or offensive image, you are invited to get over it: sin is offensive and damaging, and only suffering love can redeem it. Those who cling defiantly to their sin won't get past the gates or the foundations, will they? How could it be heaven otherwise?

Again, this may all sound a bit like "pie in the sky bye and bye" as people used to say. But the point of the New Jerusalem is not to placate us and get us to be good with the promise of bliss in the afterlife, and certainly not to make us disdain this world and live for the next one. It's to make sure that we understand our destiny in Christ. If we know where we're going to end up, it will help us know how to live now. If we know the ending, it will help us live through the middle.

So, how then shall we live? Be alive in the midst of deadness. Live Jesus' way in the midst of an evil and seductive world. Be courageous in the face of persecution. Be faithful in a world of disloyalty; be loving in a world of fear. In a culture that tells us we can never have enough, give stuff away for Jesus and for others—stop grabbing and getting and start letting go. Stop trying to save yourself, and let Jesus find you and bring you home to live life His way now and in the New Jerusalem. This life is not a rehearsal—it's the real thing. But it's a great time to be practicing up for life with God in the eternal life that is to come.

Today, could literally be the first day of the rest of your life—only now it will be a life that begins today and extends into eternal life. That's the destiny you were created for, and God longs to restore it to us through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. If that's not what you're looking for, what is? What else is more worthy of your love and loyalty, your faith and hope, than He is?

The Lord is with you. Amen.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Please read Revelation 21: 1-14. There are two great themes here, and each is dependent on something only God can do: only God can redeem people and create the new Jerusalem, and only God can bring judgment and justice on those who are opposed to Him.

2. Read the passage out loud. Take 5 minutes to reflect individually on key words or phrases--be sure to include one that you find comforting and one you find either troubling or not so comfortable; jot your reflections down. Share your reflections with each other. Be sure to take some time to apply the passage to yourselves: what is God saying to us that we'd better take seriously?