

“Imagine”
Revelation 21:1-6

Now that the debate over healthcare has ended, immigration is on the horizon as the next hot button issue for our country. I am amazed at how we get manipulated emotionally every time over such issues which often turns out as a political game to get more votes for one group or the other. We get limited to one way of thinking or the other. You are either for or against immigration! But what if there is a third way? What if some issues are not so simple in life? What if our work is to hold the differences that we have in respect and love and learn to live within those differences to come up with common solutions?

Here is a thought that might help you stretch beyond the duality of the current debate on immigration. What if the so-called aliens or undocumented to our land are not people who are trying to cross our borders? What if these aliens are not coming across our land but are coming from outer space? Last week, the British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking said that aliens are out there, but it could be too dangerous for humans to interact with extraterrestrial life. Hawking claims in a new documentary titled "Into the Universe with Stephen Hawking" that intelligent alien life forms almost certainly exist — but warns that communicating with them could be "too risky." "We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet," Hawking said. "I imagine they might exist in massive ships ... having used up all the resources from their home planet. Such advanced aliens would perhaps become nomads, looking to conquer and colonize whatever planets they can reach." The 68-year-old scientist said a visit by extraterrestrials to Earth might well be like Christopher Columbus arriving in the Americas, "which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans." Hawking said. "To my mathematical brain, the numbers alone make thinking about aliens perfectly rational." Hawking said an attack by interstellar predators is just one of the dismaying possibilities in the search for intelligent life beyond Earth. As average people, we can only imagine such things beyond ourselves, beyond the world we know, beyond our little battles over borders and resources. It is helpful for us to look beyond the limitations of our daily lives to see new possibilities in the challenges that face us as a human race. How would we deal with immigration then?

This is what our Bible passage for today from Revelation challenges us to do. We are called to look at the big picture of life, to see life as God sees it. We are called to expand our horizons to think in terms of the whole universe and the kingdom of God being a reality that helps us see ourselves as citizens of God's universe and not just our own countries and cultures. Contrary to popular belief, Revelation is not a book of doom and gloom and final judgments. It is a book about hope that invites us to live in God's reign right now.

Yet, the book of Revelation has often been misused and misunderstood as a book about the end times. In most of our popular media, this book gets reduced to being about a cosmic battle between good and evil where only a few will be saved. By the way, an interesting fact for you is that the book of Revelation does not have the word rapture in it at all. It is something that is usually superimposed on it by interpreters. People over the centuries have used parts of Revelation to predict the exact date for the end of the world and every time these predictions have not come to fruition. This is because these predictions are only misguided interpretations of the symbolic language found in this book. A good example to remember is that the numeric designation of 666 for the beast does not stand for the devil. It actually stood for Caesar Nero. Of course, on the other side of the theological spectrum are those who want to just simply

dismiss this book and never read it because it is too confusing to them. Most pastors who don't believe in the scary end of the world scenarios simply avoid preaching on Revelation.

I believe that it is important for us to take the message of Revelation seriously and in its historical context. The author of this letter was most likely someone living on the Island of Patmos in Asia Minor who was writing to seven churches in that part of the world and trying to encourage them to continue in the faith and ministry of Jesus Christ. The author used highly symbolic language and many images to talk about the realities of the day. The issues facing these churches were the political and economic oppression of the Roman Empire and the ability of the church to continue to be faithful to the values of the Kingdom of God instead of the lure of the empire. The writer of Revelation was dealing with these specific issues.

The passage we read for today from Revelation 21 is about a vision for the world as God intended it to be. The vision is for the renewal of the earth through God's work. It is a vision of a Holy City which will live according to the ways of God's love in peace, justice, and compassion. Biblical scholars observe that the setting of a city is really important because it shows that God does not restore humanity back to the Garden of Eden. Instead God renews the city. God's redeeming work does not take us out of community. It instead renews our interconnectedness. All of this is set in the context of our human history. The vision for a new heaven and a new earth is not about some other realm that is in the future when we die. The vision is about God's reign being here in the world as we know it. The true work of faith is to join God's mission of renewal and redemption. The New Jerusalem is about creating communities here on earth who are committed to loving one another. People in the Holy City will not watch their brothers and sisters suffer in poverty and hunger, nor will they attack each other violently. The key to this new world will be love. This is the expanded vision which Revelation invites us to. Instead of looking at all that divides us and all of our mistakes as human beings, we are invited to engage in the healing work of God's renewal of creation to bring more love, more peace and more possibilities to our world. St. John of the Cross, the great mystic, made this insight the center-piece of his theology of healing. For him, this is the way we heal: "We heal not by confronting all of our wounds and selfishness head-on, which would overwhelm us and drown us in discouragement, but by growing to what he calls "our deepest center". For him, this center is not first of all some deep place of solitude inside the soul, but rather the furthest place of growth that we can attain, the optimum of our potential. To grow to what our deepest DNA has destined us for is what makes us whole, makes us tall—humanly, spiritually, and morally."

Our deepest center as human beings is love. Our deepest way of being in the kingdom of God is living in this world by the ways and laws of love. Even though our popular culture might push us to see those on the other side of our ways of thinking as worthless or even worse, as our enemies, the kingdom of God is about living by the values of love and seeing the potential of renewal in every human being knowing that our well-being depends on the well-being of others.

Tony Cowan tells this story, "When the great composer Franz Schubert died, he was survived by a group of brilliant students who were fiercely jealous of each other and had competed for Schubert's favor. He was also survived by his brother, who knew very well how these musicians would fight for scraps of the deceased master's work. Schubert's brother took one of Schubert's last manuscripts and cut it up into fragments, mailing one piece to each of the great man's students. They were aghast, knowing that no copy of the original manuscript existed. Some of them decided to mount and frame their fragment, treating it with reverence as a kind of holy relic of the departed genius. But a few months later, Schubert's brother sent them each a letter suggesting that they overlook their rivalry and come together to perform this late work. After all, he wrote, wouldn't that be a greater show of piety and appreciation than merely holding on to

the fragments as relics? After much discussion and correspondence, Schubert's students agreed to come together and give a public performance of the work. The event was highly publicized and drew an enormous amount of enthusiasm from music lovers throughout the country. At the first rehearsal, however, Schubert's students realized that in the middle of the piece something was missing. More than just a few bars, it was a noticeable lacuna. Indeed, one of them had decided to withhold his fragment of the manuscript. When contacted, he abruptly refused to have anything to do with the project. He believed that his fragment would greatly increase in value because it would forever be known as "the missing music" from Schubert's works. On the night of the concert, the musicians performed brilliantly and with deep feeling for the beloved composer. When they came to the part of the piece that was missing, they simply held thirty-two bars of silence, heads bowed, bows unmoving, and then continued to the conclusion of the piece. The audience was astounded by this silent acknowledgment of Schubert's absence, and many commented that it was the emotional climax of the evening. Schubert's brother took the stage after the applause addressing the assembly: "Tonight you have listened to one of Fran's final gifts to the world. The music we have heard has soothed us with the reminder of his subtle presence here. But it has also given us something more: there is no way to fill the hole in the world now that he has gone, there is no way to escape the silence, that rest which punctuated the performance. The quality of that silence, the remembrance of our own incompleteness, this is what compels us to come together again and again, so that the music will be completed by our common silence and there will, some day, be nothing missing. Only then will our collective work be fully performed." Amen.