

DATE: July 12, 2026
TEXT: Revelation 1:1a, 21:22-22:5 ; Amos 5:18-24
THEME: We will certainly live into wholeness, with imagination as our guide.
SUBJECT: Hope
TITLE: Use Your Imagination!

Main question: When will God end injustice and bring about peace?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

What's your favorite genre? Do you like mysteries? Murder mysteries? Fiction? Science Fiction? Biographies? Autobiographies? I enjoy science fiction because it helps me to think about our world through the motif of a fictional world as it raises questions about our culture. What if people became exhibits at a zoo on a highly developed distant planet? Would that be ethical? What are the ethics of zoos in our own world? Or, what if law enforcement could reliably predict our likelihood of committing a crime and could arrest us based simply on that likelihood?

So what IS your favorite genre? Did anyone think of "apocalyptic literature"? It's not common today, but we find this literary style in the Bible in the book of Daniel, the gospel of Mark, Isaiah and, of course, in Revelation. Even for those who may like this genre, we read it with 21st century minds - light years apart from the world in which the Bible was written. Apocalyptic literature seeks to convey truth, not fact. Jesus' parables share this characteristic with apocalypticism: they are true, though it's likely that there never was a Samaritan who was accosted on the way to Jericho or a sower who sowed seed on rocky soil, among thorns and along a path. Apocalypticism also tends to be future-oriented. [Advance slide here] The "Peaceable Kingdom" by Edward Hicks may

convey truth about a future reality. But is it factual? Will leopards and goats actually lie down together when peace among nations comes about? I don't mean to limit God; God can and will do what God has in mind to do. But to see that image and to interpret it as a literal portrayal of our future just isn't what the apocalyptic style is about.

[Advance slide here] Similarly, in the end times, shall we expect a tree to straddle a river with a beam of light emanating from behind? (Never mind the decidedly white European look of the main characters in both paintings.) The point is that apocalyptic images and word images are not to be taken literally. They're art and, as art, they have a deeper meaning. As art, they're also given to multiple meanings, multiple interpretations.

One of the scriptures I want to focus on today comes from Revelation and I think we need to be careful about how we read it because it was written from a 1st century perspective, not a 21st century one. One way to begin understanding Revelation from a 1st century mindset is to consider the word "soon". The first verse in Revelation (1:1) reads: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must **soon** take place." Dr. Mitzi Minor, professor of New Testament theology at Memphis Theological Seminary, reminds us of the obvious: people thought about time differently 2,000 years ago. People didn't have atomic clocks back then. They didn't count seconds or even minutes. "Soon" meant something entirely different to the author of Revelation and to other ancients who used apocalyptic literature to convey something about their understanding of the future. Dr. Minor says, "While we tend to read 'soon' in terms of chronology, first-century folks would have heard [the word 'soon'] as indicating certainty." Most people 2,000 years ago were focused on surviving today, tomorrow

and possibly the next day. They weren't as long-term oriented as we more affluent, literate and time-precise folks tend to be. They didn't think about retirement or the value of their houses in 20 years. "Soon", then, was less about the future for them and more about confidence. If Dr. Minor is right, then we might replace the word 'soon' with the words 'certainly' so that the first verse of Revelation might read: "This is the revelation of Jesus Christ, given by God to show the faithful what must certainly happen." Still keep in mind, though, that "certainly" does not mean "factually".

Let's look at another piece of apocalyptic literature for a moment from the book of Amos. It's also a vision of the future. Now, I don't know if you noticed, but Amos in today's first reading was kind of mad. And if you know Mr. Amos, this is pretty typical. In his apocalyptic vision, the people who wait for light will experience only darkness. For Amos, not only should they NOT expect to be saved in the future; God has rejected them already. "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. [I reject your burnt offerings; I have no regard for your fellowship offerings]" (vs. 21-22). What is he so mad about? He's mad at people who expect God to save them from all their perceived enemies no matter how they act. They may pray to God, but they exploit the poor (2:6); they may worship God in the Temple, but they worship other gods (2:8). Amos is angry at Israelites who complain about their own oppression and cry out for liberation even as they oppress others. The last verse in this passage evokes the image of a river of justice and a stream of righteousness that will roll on and never fail! Is that river - that stream - an instrument of God's justice that will wipe out the complaining Israelites? Or is it presented as an alternative way to approach God so that God won't wipe them out? The answer is: yes. If one reads this passage with an

apocalyptic mindset, there's a sense of certainty that the stream of righteousness will roll on, but there's no "right" way that it will come about. We're not looking for clues to solve a mystery with a single answer, nor are we deciphering a code to find the correct interpretation. God can destroy and God can build up. WILL God do both? Will God do something else? I suppose that's the challenge laid before the reader or the preacher to discern. Are there consequences for those who exploit the poor? As in Amos' time, exploitation continues to happen today. Exploiters may suffer, but they may not. Amos didn't see it in his time, but he said they would (certainly) suffer eventually. Maybe there was hope for them, however. Maybe they wouldn't suffer if they started to align themselves with God's purpose. With the river theme in mind, perhaps Amos was pointing out that exploiting the poor might have been like trying to walk upstream chest deep during spring thaw. You might be able to do it, but it's more likely that you'll be swept downstream and probably get pretty scraped up and possibly killed. Better to "go with the flow" of the river - with God's flow: take care of the poor, visit the sick and the imprisoned. In short, attend to God's will. You'll be less likely to be swept away and be destroyed. God promises that all will be cared for "soon" and we resist that certainty at our own peril.

I want to acknowledge that I just took a passage of apocalyptic literature and offered an answer. Maybe it works for you, maybe it doesn't. The beauty of apocalypticism, however, is that you get to have your own interpretation according to the way God is speaking to you. Try not to get too literal, however. That's where apocalyptic interpretation tends to go off the rails.

Let's get back to John's apocalyptic vision in Revelation. Here's an important

point for appreciating what John has given us. The Greek word *apokalypsis* (translated “Revelation”) indicates an “unveiling.” Imagine when the iPhone 18 comes out. There’ll be lots of hype and fanfare; maybe a big ceremony that involves lights and a stage. An announcer will build anticipation and then pull back a curtain to reveal this impressive product. John does something similar. In other words, he unveils something new. John might have said, “Soon, God’s peace and justice will prevail.” While that will certainly happen, John invites readers to see what he sees by “unveiling” truth through images and symbols that spark our imaginations. John imagines God’s majestic throne, a little lamb standing (though it had been slaughtered), a woman clothed with the sun that protects her from a red dragon who was cast out of heaven, the descent of “Jerusalem” as God’s final act that accompanies the renewal of creation. These are John’s images and he invites us to create our own images!

Let’s look at two more images as John describes this “new Jerusalem” where peace and justice will certainly prevail. “Light” is important in the first paragraph (21:22-27). The sun and moon - or light bulbs and candles for that matter - won’t be necessary anymore because God will be ever-present. “For the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.” The Lamb, of course, is a primary image for the resurrected Jesus. Citizens of the new Jerusalem won’t need the sun, moon, light bulbs and candles to see anymore because the Lamb will show them the way. There will be no deceptions, no false gods, no exploiters, no complainers. Is this possible? Perhaps not in a literal sense here on earth, but John invites us to imagine a reality in which wealth and power no longer hold sway, and without such imagination that reality is certainly NOT possible for when we create, we create twice: once in our imagination

and then in reality. Deception, manipulation and exploitation are all part of our reality now, but our current reality is like living under a cover of darkness. If we imagine a different reality, we begin to “unveil” a new heaven - and possibly a new earth - where God’s glory will not allow such things to be done in darkness, where light reveals all things and, because there is no hiding from God, there will be no wrongdoing. In John’s vision, it will simply be impossible to carry out ill intent; the very structure and nature of the new Jerusalem will make it so. Are we talking about a place? A time? An understanding? A higher plane of being? All of that. You get to decide. It’s your imagination.

Another important image in our reading today is the Tree of Life (22:2) which straddles the River of Life. Trees are found throughout scripture. They generally symbolize life, growth and healing. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil appears in Genesis. Interestingly, we’re told to stay away from that tree. But in Psalm 1, those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked are like a tree “planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Ps. 1:3). That’s the same tree image as the one here in Revelation. The **Tree of Life**, in particular, appears several times in Proverbs. “Wisdom” (which is decidedly female) is a tree of life to those who embrace her (Pr. 3:18). “The fruit of righteousness is a tree of life” (Pr. 11:30). “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Pr. 13:12). “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life” (Pr. 15:4). We’re speaking in metaphor here, of course, and metaphor is the bread and butter of apocalyptic literature because it opens up the imagination. It makes us curious. It makes us ask questions. How can a healing tongue bring life? How can I seek after wisdom that is life-giving? The more

we ask, the more we learn, the more we imagine, the closer we get to the new Jerusalem. We defer hope for a time, but “soon” our longing will be fulfilled. In Dr. Minor’s wise words, “God’s intention for us and for all creation is that we share in God’s gift of life, not only when we die, but also when we live in the light of God’s revelation through Jesus” right now. Which means, as John is “unveiling” to us, that we shall certainly live apart from lies and falseness or anything accursed (Rev. 22:3), just like Jesus did, and we will absolutely create a world free from deception, manipulation and exploitation when we first create such a world in our mind’s eye and then bring it about with our imaginations as the blueprint.

When will that world come about? Soon.