

Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-5

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: A Flourishing Future

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / December 5th, 2021

I grew up in a mountain town in Colorado called Estes Park. Estes is famous for being the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. One of the tallest mountains in Colorado is right outside of town, a 14-thousand-footer named Long's Peak (14,259 feet). But growing up in Estes, I never climbed Long's Peak. We heard all the horror stories of people falling, getting stuck, and dying, and I didn't want to risk it.

And then I moved away to sea-level and decided, "Yeah, let's climb that mountain." Our group got up at 2:30 am, drove to the parking lot, already at about 9,500 feet of elevation, and started the 7.5-mile hike to the peak. The first part is easy. It's night, so you have flashlights, you're with a group, and you begin to hike. But then your group begins to spread out. Some go ahead, some lag behind, you trip on rocks and steps, but you get above tree-line after a while.

Then the sun starts to rise. And you see a sheer rock face and realize you have a long, steep, nearly impossible way to go. We started our series with A Vision of Flourishing from Genesis 1-3. In the beginning, God called people to seek the flourishing of their world, to take our world and make it better, to take creation to its mountain peak. Did you know in Ezekiel, God says the garden of Eden was "on the holy mountain of God."¹ All creation is supposed to experience this lush garden on God's mountain.

What happened? We fell down the mountain. Adam and Eve sought flourishing without God, and now we've all stumbled and struggle between flourishing and fallenness, between a high mountain garden and a low, dry desert. We're trying to get back to the mountain peak, but the night is long, and the climb is steep. But what if we knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we would make it to the top, to the garden?

God promises his people a flourishing future.

God sends the early church, a church struggling under the weight of persecution, a vision of a flourishing eternity. The disciple John, one of Jesus' twelve, receives a vision of a new heaven and earth and a glorious city coming down from heaven to rest on the earth at the end of time.

Revelation 21:1-3, 5 (ESV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 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. . . .

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

It's not that there was a big bonfire, and God burns the whole world up. Instead, God is going to restore our planet. He's going to make it brand new again by bringing heaven down. Some people like to joke, "Jesus says, 'Behold, I make all things new,' not, 'Behold, I make all new things.'"² He's going to get rid of the bad stuff, bring new stuff, and make the good stuff better than it ever was before.³

When we got our nursery ready for our firstborn, I pulled up the carpet and found an old wooden floor underneath. I rented one of those super heavy floor sanders, stripped the floor, and did multiple coats of

stain. I painted over the red walls with a light green, and it was like a brand-new room. Then I posted a bunch of photos on Facebook, perhaps too many. That's what God is going to do to our world. He's going to strip it down, stain it, paint it, make it brand-new, and show it off.

God promises beyond a shadow of a doubt that he will dwell with his people, the church, in this new heavens, earth, and eternal city. All creation will become a garden temple where God's presence will dwell. We can trust God will do this because he says it's as good as done.

Revelation 21:6a (ESV)

And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. . . .

God grounds this vision of our flourishing eternity in his character. His very being is at stake, his essence if he is God. If he is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (A to Z), he knows how the story ends. And he shows us it ends as it began. God initially walked in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.⁴ Revelation 21-22 shows a return to the garden and a city on a mountain like Eden.

Revelation 21:10 (ESV)

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,

The city comes down out of heaven to a great high mountain, like Eden. This is why I like telling my Long's Peak story. That's what humanity does. We try to climb the mountain, but without God. That's the tower of Babel and Babylon in every era. We try to go up, but we always need God to bring heaven down. That's grace, and that's what God does. God promises us a flourishing garden city just like Eden, where everyone who loves Jesus will enjoy him forever. And it's all dependent on God, not us. We don't have to create a political utopia in this life. God promises he will take us back to the garden in his timing.

Revelation 22:1-3 (ESV)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

Look at all the parallels between Genesis 2 and Revelation 22. God creates a garden in both. The tree of life is in both. A river flows from the garden in both. And both are on top of a mountain. And this future is certain. God promises the healing of the nations in a perfect garden city. No longer will there be partisanship or politics gone bad. We will have the best city with the best king where humankind will flourish forever.

In John 15, Jesus identifies himself with the Tree of Life.⁵ Eternal life and flourishing come from him. He makes flourishing possible because he became cursed on a tree. Jesus faced the withering wrath of God's judgment. But like a seed falls to the ground and is buried in the ground, Jesus came back to life so that any who repent of their sins and believe in him can receive eternal life, eternal flourishing. Do you want to flourish? Come to the gardener.⁶ He will forgive you and make you new. *God promises us a flourishing future.* And is that how this series ends? No, because we have not yet arrived at the mountain-top garden.

As you climb closer to Long's Peak, you go over a boulder field before arriving at a location called the "keyhole." And then, you get to the hard part. You go through the keyhole and along a ledge where you could injure yourself or die if you slip and fall. There's this one part where you have to climb on a metal bar pounded into the cliff. Then you climb the trough, which is like 30-flights of stairs at 13,000 feet.

I was so exhausted at this point I sat down and nearly gave up. I couldn't see the top, and I was done. That's what it is like to seek the flourishing of our world in a world that is fallen. The air is thin. But God doesn't

want us to lose our vision of flourishing. As I was sitting at the top of the trough, a stranger came up and yelled at me, “If you don’t make it to the top from here, *it’s going to eat at you for the rest of your life!*” I’m not sure his advice was wise, but I kept climbing.

After another harrowing ledge and rock scramble, I reached the top. No garden. Just rocks and tired hikers, but the view was breathtaking. It was a clear blue day, and you could see across the Rockies and plains. A year later, I climbed Long’s Peak again. But the second time around, I didn’t go straight from sea level. I lived in Estes for a summer, trained, and hiked with the sure confidence that I’d already done it once and would reach the top again.

I’m going to put up some photos, and let’s see if you can guess which was my first hike and which was my second. One I look exhausted, and the other I look happy. The first time I hiked that mountain, I didn’t know if I could do it, but the second time I did. Our vision of the future impacts how we live today. What do we have to hope for if our future is bleak or if this life is all we have? But what if God has promised us with absolute certainty a flourishing garden-city future? Would that change how we live today?

We live differently in light of our flourishing future.

The vision God gives John, and the early Christians is supposed to comfort them and help them live differently in their present suffering. The church is experiencing immense persecution under Rome and its emperors. But what if you knew that you’d end up in a garden? You could face the lions with hope. Maybe we’re not going to face lions today, but we do face donkeys and elephants and immense pressure to conform. But when the world presses in, we hear the shepherd’s call to climb the mountain.

Matthew 5:14, 16 (ESV)

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. . . . 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

What a minute. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus climbs up a mountain, sits down, maybe on a rock, perhaps it even looked like a throne, and teaches his followers to start living like they are in that Edenic mountain-top city already? Jerusalem and its temple were on a mountain. Couldn’t the geopolitical kingdom of Judah do the job? No, only God’s people, not Jerusalem or America, not London or Hong Kong, only we the church can be God’s shining city on a hill. This is the “**Already but not yet.**” The church is already supposed to be a shining city on a hill, even though we won’t fully arrive till Christ’s return.

Jesus did a perfect job of describing how his church can become a mountain-top garden-city people in the Sermon on the Mount, his political manifesto in Matthew 5-7. I’ve done a marginal job in our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* sermon series using the acronym “F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H.”

F – Faith, Not Fear

L – Love God & Neighbor

O – Other Peoples’ Good

U – Understanding & Wisdom

R – Reign of Christ

I – Image of God

S – Speak Prophetically

H – Help the Needy

“Flourish” is eight ways to work towards that Edenic vision God gave us in Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. And we will get there. We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we will arrive at our eternal flourishing, which changes how we live and experience life today.

Have you heard about the supply-chain shortage? There’s a backup of goods not being manufactured and shipped as quickly as consumers want. This has led some small businesses to hoard and stockpile inventory, which is a risky “gamble.”⁷ You might remember when the pandemic hit; everyone was worried about toilet paper, so we all hoarded it. If we believe our future is bleak or this is all we get, we’ll hoard power, stockpile political wins, and vilify the opposing team. But if we believe our future is overflowing with abundance, we can share that flourishing today, even with our political enemies. *We live differently in light of our flourishing future.* But what if we try the way of flourishing and don’t see any changes in our world?

The work of flourishing has eternal significance.

Any good work done for the flourishing of others has eternal worth. We see this in two places in Revelation.

Revelation 14:12-13 (ESV)

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

God calls his people, his church, to endure, to keep loving God and our neighbors, even our enemies, everything we talked about in “F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H.” Somehow, mysteriously, our work will make an eternal impact. Our deeds will follow us. So how we engage in work, even politics, has eternal significance.

Monica and I visited the “Museu Picasso” (Picasso Museum) in Barcelona on our Honeymoon. Picasso painted different styles throughout his life. When he was young, he painted masterpieces, and when he was old, he painted like a child. And for a season, he painted in shades of blue. One of his works is *The Crouching Beggar*, which shows an impoverished woman, wrapped in greens and blues, her eyes down, kneeling beside a street.⁸ Maybe Picasso encountered someone like this in an alley in Barcelona.

Before Picasso painted his work, recent research using a x-ray scanner system has discovered that one of Picasso’s students painted the countryside outside Barcelona.⁹ And his student’s painting, the mountains in the background, became the foundation of Picasso’s work. One researcher said it was “Kind of a jazz riff back and forth.”¹⁰ Picasso incorporated his student’s work into his work. That’s what God does. He incorporates our good work into his masterpiece. *The work of flourishing has eternal significance.*

We don’t live in a “winner takes all” world, but in a world where the way of flourishing wins in the end. Every good thing we do as individuals and the church body has worth, even as a country. John says this:

Revelation 21:24 (ESV)

By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it,

He’s talking about the new Jerusalem, the eternal city filled with the glory of God and the light of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Even the nations will bring something worthwhile, their Picassos, into eternity. *The work of flourishing has eternal significance.*

So how do you want to engage in politics? Has this series changed our perspective as a church? We all have a choice. Will we fight against the culture, flee from it, give in and fuse our beliefs to it? Or will we practice faithful prophetic presence, seeking the common good and shalom because we know our eternal flourishing

is secure? *God promises his people a flourishing future. We live differently in light of our flourishing future. The work of flourishing has eternal significance.*

I opened this sermon series by telling the true story of a man and woman planting trees in the desert, and slowly transforming their patch of desert into a forest. This week I watched a short story by French writer Jean Giono, written in 1953, called “The Man Who Planted Trees.”¹¹ They didn’t have YouTube in 1953, but someone made his short story into a 30-minute video. Christopher Plummer narrates it. It’s great.

The Man Who Planted Trees begins with the story of a young man going on a long walk before World War I. As he walks through the French Alps, he encounters a barren wilderness where there’s nothing but ruined homes, desolation, hopelessness, and despair. The people who try to live there slowly go crazy.

But the young man encounters a shepherd in this wilderness. He spends the night in his home and is intrigued when the shepherd begins to pick and choose one hundred perfect acorns. The next day the shepherd takes the young man to a barren stretch of ground where he takes his iron shepherd’s staff and breaks the soil up. Then he carefully plants each acorn, one at a time.

He plants one hundred that day, but it turns out that he has planted 100,000 acorns. The shepherd is concerned for the environment, for the wasteland, and wants to restore it to life. The young man continues on his journey, and after the Great War full of death and violence, he returns to the barren wilderness. This time the wilderness is full of 10,000 short-trees he can see over, a young, beautiful forest.

The shepherd had planted 100,000 acorns. Most have not sprung up, and others have perished, but still, 10,000 new trees remained. That’s what we’re doing when we do the work of flourishing. We’re planting acorns with the hope that God can do a greater work of revitalization. The young man commits to returning to the shepherd every couple of years. We keep coming back to Christ, our shepherd, seeing what he can do.

As the shepherd plants threats come, forestry experts, loggers, politicians. But over many years, the shepherd tends and cares for the forest, no longer a shepherd but a keeper of bees. When the shepherd dies by the end of the story, a barren stretch of the French Alps has transformed into a forest teeming with life and people.

That’s what God calls us, his people, the church, to do—to seek the work of flourishing, shalom, and the common good in the wilderness. We just follow Christ, our chief shepherd, as he does the work of flourishing in our world. *Jesus promises his people and our world a flourishing future.*

Benediction - Psalm 90:16-17 (ESV)

Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish the work of our hands upon us;
yes, establish the work of our hands!

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my tenth and final sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *A Flourishing Future*. Here are several follow-up spiritual exercises for continuing to learn and grow:

Listen (sermon): Listen to Tim Mackie’s fifth and final sermon in the book of Daniel, “5. Resurrection Hope - Faithfulness in Exile [Daniel] - Tim Mackie (The Bible Project)” (56:14). I encourage you to check out all five sermons. Still, this one (like #2) ties in exceptionally well to our closing sermon as Mackie teaches on Daniel’s vision of Christ’s return and creation’s eternal flourishing.

Short Story: Watch the short film, based on the short story, entitled “The Man Who Planted Trees” from “French author Jean Giono, published in 1953.” Kaitlyn Schiess compares this man to the church. She writes, “This single man—‘one man, one body, one spirit’ the narrator calls him, much like the church—is an apt illustration of the commission and possibility of the church in a fallen world, a church that knows what the end of the story looks like and strives to realize some portion of it here and now.” YouTube: <https://youtu.be/PYIsIZXCQa4> (30:08)

Read (intermediate): Read *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor* by Kaitlyn Schiess (220 pages; paperback, Audible, Kindle). If you wonder how politics affects our spiritual life, including what we worship and where we find security, I recommend Schiess’s book. If you’ve been a part of our Christian Education class, you know she has had a huge influence on my thinking. This book is a good next step if you want to keep the learning going. For an introduction to Schiess and her book, check out her interview on the *Holy Post* podcast, “420: Four False Political Gospels with Kaitlyn Schiess” (Starts 10:26). I enjoy the *Holy Post* podcast and recommend anyone listen to it for author interviews and Christian analysis of the news.

Worship: Listen to “The Porter’s Gate - We Labor Unto Glory (feat. Liz Vice, Josh Garrels, & Madison Cunningham)” on YouTube (3:48). This song reminds us that whatever work we do in this world, even the work of politics, can be done unto the glory of God.

Thank you so much for being a part of this sermon series on faith and politics. I hope you’ve learned some biblical truths that will help you follow Jesus into all of life, even politics.

God bless,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

Sermon Slides

See this week’s sermon on our website.

Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small group coming soon.

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Endnotes

1. Ezekiel 28:13-14.
2. Andy Crouch. ...
3. See Stephen Witmer, *Eternity Changes Everything* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2014) 17-23, Kindle.
4. Genesis 3:8, 23-24.
5. John 15:1-11.
6. John 20:15.
7. Sapna Maheshwari and Coral Murphy Marcos, “Supply Chain Problems Have Small Retailers Gambling on Hoarding,” *The New York Times*, published November 30, 2021, accessed December 4, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/business/small-retailers-hoarding-supply-chain.html>.
8. “La Miséreuse accroupie,” 1000 | Museums presents: Focus on Pablo Picasso, published 2018, accessed December 1, 2021 <https://focusonpicasso.com/product/la-misereuse-accroupie/>.
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10. Kenneth Chang, “In Picasso’s Blue Period, Scanners Find Secrets He Painted Over,” *The New York Times*, published February 20, 2018, accessed December 1, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/science/picasso-blue-period-scans.html>.
11. Jean Giono, “The Man Who Planted Trees,” translated by Jean Roberts, Société Radio-Canada Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1987, YouTube published January 16, 2012, accessed December 2, 2021 <https://youtu.be/PYlsIZXCQa4>. I learned of this story from Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of our Neighbor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 176-177. Kindle.