

Easter 6C: Revelation 21
The Church of the Good Shepherd
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Heaven is not our Home

“Everybody wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die.” It’s a witty line, sung by Allison Krauss, highlighting the paradox of Christian faith: we all want to get to heaven, just not right now. The thing is, though, that’s not what we hope for as Christians. We’ve all—most of us anyway—have grown up thinking we are destined for or at least working towards heaven. But that’s a mistake, a misunderstanding of Christian teaching. Heaven is *not* our home, and was never meant to be. That this is so couldn’t be more clear than in the passage from the book of Revelation you just heard.

Revelation, you’ll remember, is a collection of spiritual visions given to the apostle John while in exile. The passage we just read comes from the very end of the book, from the final revelation, the culminating vision of the whole book. John here stands at the far side of history, with its war and violence, its cruelty and oppression, its typical connivance between political power and corrupt greed, and is given a glimpse of how it’s all going to work out in the end. This last vision is so full and rich and expansive that it is divided in two readings, half last Sunday and half today. In today’s reading, the vision introduced last Sunday unfolds and opens up before us, and we are drawn “farther up and further in” to the breathtaking scene.

When we consider this vision, both parts of it, we have to admit the picture of “heaven” given here is something of a surprise. Missing is any talk of golden-haloed saints sitting on puffy clouds and angels strumming harps for eternity. Instead, what John sees is the coming of “a new heaven and a new earth.” A new earth...did you catch that last week? There’s going to be a *new* earth, not *no* earth. This is important. Heaven is not our home, earth is. At no point does God promise an earth-free, immaterial existence for us humans. As much as we might fancy escaping earthly existence and being rid of our bodies, with all their weaknesses, limitations and tendency to fall apart, the Bible gives no support for that kind of thinking. Rather, reading the Bible, we are immersed in materiality from start to finish, from creation in Genesis to re-creation in Revelation. Between these boundaries nothing takes place apart from biology and history, geography and weather, incarnation and sacrament. Our existence is forever an earthly, material existence. If that weren’t the case, then we wouldn’t need Easter. Jesus wouldn’t have had to be resurrected. His soul could have just floated up to heaven. But instead God began his re-creation with the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus, which shows how much God values bodies and bodily existence. God made us as bodies, for life on earth. That doesn’t change at the end of the world. God doesn’t throw the earth and matter away; rather He renews it.

The way I like to think about it is as a cosmic reboot. Like when you have a computer and it starts getting buggy, lagging in its operations, you run an anti-virus program, and then you have to reboot it. And when its rebooted, all the things that you want to keep, that you’ve “saved,” are still there, but the viruses, the bugs and glitches (things like sin, death and disease) are wiped

away. That's what John sees here in this vision of the end—a creation rebooted, with all the things that threaten to crash it removed by Jesus' anti-virus software!

Another surprising thing about this vision of our ultimate destiny is that it is a vision—of all things—of *a city*. Other religions envision their “heaven,” their afterlife, as a gardenlike paradise or a return to an unspoiled wilderness. This seems to us good and right, for what landscape is more evocative of communion with God than a garden? Gardens are peaceful. Gardens are places where we stroll and contemplate, smell the roses, and commune with God in the cool of the morning. A garden is life blessed and ordered by God. Paradise is a garden in Genesis. Love is a garden in the Song of Songs.

Cities, on the other hand, are dirty, noisy, congested places, busy with self-assertion and ambition, battering and abusive to persons, forgetful and defiant of God. In the Bible, the first city, Enoch, was built by the first murderer, Cain, and was destroyed in the Flood when God cleansed the earth of wickedness. The second city, Babel, was built in an arrogant attempt to storm heaven and was abandoned in a tangle of broken languages. Throughout the Bible, the city is a place of temptation, of corruption, of judgment. Again and again, the city shows itself to be the living embodiment of humanity's failure to live in harmony with each other, with creation and with God.

So you'd think that, when we finally get to the point where God's will is done, when God renews all things, we would be as far removed as possible from the city. But no, the world God has in store for us is not some bucolic retreat. There's not so much as a hint of escapism in John's vision of the end. Rather, the world God promises us is a city, as real as any city we might think of...and yet unlike any city known on earth.

Indeed, the city John sees coming down from heaven is absolutely awe-inspiring. The city radiates, he says, like a rare jewel, “like jasper, clear as crystal.” Its dimensions are perfectly square and perfectly proportioned, its size *massive*—12,000 stadia, by John's account. That's 1,500 miles square in our reckoning, equal in size to the entirety of the Roman Empire spread across the Mediterranean. Beyond its size, the city is striking for its walls, tall and adorned with precious gems and punctuated by twelve gates, made out of solid pearl (“pearly gates”). And there's a street running through the city, made of gold so mirror-smooth you can see yourself in it. Taken together, the details John relates make the city out to be extravagant, tremendously wealthy, even opulent, and that's before hearing how kings from all over the world bring tribute to the city from their kingdoms. The point of all this opulence, though, is not to brag about the city's prosperity but to evoke its *spiritual* richness, how everything one might value is found there.

That the real wealth of the city is its *spiritual* endowments is clear in the fact that John identifies the city as not just any city, but the city of Jerusalem. Now, Jerusalem in John's day was known as a cramped, thousand-year-old city, quite without much splendor. It was still the political center of the Jewish people, the ancestral seat of power for David and his descendants, but the luster had long been rubbed off and replaced by the stain of repeated scandals and abuses of power. But what distinguished Jerusalem as a city was not the throne but the Temple.

You see, for all its failures and faithlessness, Jerusalem represented the biblical ideal of human community, the model city. Every city at its core is based on a vision of a people living in prosperity and in harmony with each other. For Jerusalem, that common life and identity centered on the Temple. The Temple was the place where the Lord promised to be present to his people, where God's people met Him and offered praise and thanks and contrition for their failures. Only in the *new* Jerusalem, there is no Temple—because no Temple is needed. Here in the new holy city, God is *wholly* present, not just in one spot but everywhere. God is like the sun, a light that shines on everything. Here we circle back to the hope given at the beginning of John's Gospel—the Word was made flesh and lived among us, pitching his tent, tabernacling in our midst, a healing, comforting, enlivening presence. The city is then the Incarnation writ large. Just as heaven and earth were joined together in Jesus, heaven and earth will one day be joined fully and forever in the new Jerusalem, where all the inhabitants live together in response to and in relation to God who dwells with them.

That's what I think it means that God's work culminates in the new Jerusalem—that in the end our hope to live in harmony with one another, our longing to live together with one another in love, in justice, and in joy, will be fully realized in a world, where God is recognized as the center and source of our common life.

There's one last thing to notice about this final vision—whereas the center of the new creation is the holy city, at the center of the city is a green space, a central park, if you will. And the centerpiece of the park is a great river, “the river of the water of life,” quote “bright as crystal, flowing through the heart of the city from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And on both sides of the river grow the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month.”

What is this that John describes but a garden, with its freshness and fertility and fruitfulness? Indeed, even though God's ultimate plan is for a city, it's hard not to see here signs of a Garden of Eden restored after all. Only, it's clear that our hope is not simply for “getting back to the Garden” as in the romantic Woodstock song of the sixties. The end won't simply be a *return* to the beginning, to the undefiled paradise. No, what God promises is not to erase the world we know, but to heal it. Indeed, the Tree of Life that had been off limits to Adam and Eve in the Garden will then be accessible to all: “the leaves of the Tree of Life are for the *healing* of the nations,” John says. No more will the poisons of jealousy, suspicion, and greed pollute relations between peoples; instead, in God's Tree of Life there is medicine for the world, medicine to restore health among persons and whole peoples. We see here that the new Jerusalem is a place of healing, of reconciliation, a place where ancient and deep antagonisms no longer divide and long-time enemies enjoy peace with one another. It's not just that these wars, feuds and oppressions are forgotten or pushed down or ignored. Rather the wounds are healed. Arms give way to friendship. Brokenness gives way to wholeness. Hatred gives way to love.

Never again will anything or anyone slither into the home of God's children to deceive them and replace their peace with shame. The sin and suffering and death that once ruined human life will never be repeated. Whatever is false or foul is left behind, and all freely make their offering to God, who reigns and dwells with his beloved creation.

Now, all this, I acknowledge, may sound fanciful and wishful, pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die and perhaps not particularly relevant to life here and now. I get that. I don't agree, but I get that. What you can't say, though, is that it sounds boring. The vision John relates is about as boring as a trip to Mars or a perfect round of golf at Pebble Beach, about as unengaging as creating a perfect work of art or sharing a lovely dinner with your favorite friends, as lifeless as a song that moves you to tears or a lecture that sparks wondrous insights that delight your mind.

If this scene fails to ignite our imagination and move our souls, it's probably not an issue with the vision that John describes, but with us. As C.S. Lewis once remarked, "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us; we are like ignorant children who want to continue making mud pies in a slum, because we cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

We are too easily pleased. If these lessons we've been reading from the book of Revelation do nothing else, they offer us a vivid picture of a world that is different from our own, better than the one we know, a world which we long to see and live in, a world characterized by abundance and harmony and healing, a world which God will bring into reality soon and which will never end. And knowing now where this is all going, where God is taking us and all creation, we can stand strong in our hope and endure with patience present hardships. More than that, we can begin to live in that world, to act as if it's already arrived, because we are secure in the knowledge that we are on our way home, not to heaven, but to eternal life with God.. Amen! Alleluia!