

Pastor John Pasma from Covenant Church in Edmonton and I have been working together on this series of sermons about 'God and the City' through advent. On Thursday morning we received a beautiful gift. It was a sermon! It was like it came down out of heaven from God. It fit perfectly as the concluding message for our city series. It was in a section of a commentary on Revelation by our old friend Mr. Boring. I love that guy. He is such a careful listener of the Word, it's like he is the Bible Whisperer. (see pp 219-224 in Revelation by Eugene M. Boring Interpreter's Series)

So, you need to know that the sermon this morning is mostly Boring with some Luth and Pasma worked in.

Revelation 21:1-5

City of God

We might expect the Bible to paint a picture of the future as all ski hills and beaches, mountain bike trails and great grasslands. Some people imagine 'heaven' as a place of personal happiness where we can escape all the people who really annoy us.

After all, the first city the Bible tells us about was the city of Enoch, built by Cain the murderer. And through the Bible, especially here in Revelation, the city of Babylon stands for all the collective force of human idolatry and evil. We know that cities can be desperate and dangerous places.

But instead of 'back to the garden' the future promised is a city. God's goal, and his final dwelling place is in and with his people. People who are doing life together. This city needs no temple, no special meeting place of worship, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. (21:22)

A particular city, 'Jerusalem'

At the time of John's writing, the earthly Jerusalem was a mess. We remember how God's anointed, David, claimed the fortress city from the Jebusites. The prophets dreamed that the city would be called, 'the Faithful City'. But all of that seems lost now.

Still John knows that God has not forgotten Jerusalem and will not forget her. In Isaiah 49 God says, 'can a mother forget her baby, though she may forget, I will not forget you! I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;' (verse 16)

Jerusalem's story continues.

A renewed city

Some people, especially some Christians live with the idea that this world will be destroyed and that God will start over from scratch again. If that were true, we could all hunker down and wait for the end to come. But the one seated on the throne does not say, 'I am making all new things', but, 'I am making all things new'.

God does not junk the cosmos and start all over again. Our God is the God who does not quench a smouldering wick, or break a bruised reed. (Isaiah) God renews the old and fulfills it.

The Bride-City is clothed in the righteous acts of the saints. (19:8) 'Righteous acts' are not just religious acts, but acts of justice and mercy, acts that build shalom. To quote Boring directly, 'every ditch dug, every brick laid, every vote cast, every committee decision that has contributed to the decency of human life is preserved and built into the eternal city.'

This is a call and a challenge for us to dig ditches, lay bricks, cast votes and contribute to the life of our communities. It is a call for us personally and together to be a blessing. We trust that what is done for Christ will last.

As long as we remember that the new city, the new heavens and earth are not a human achievement. **The heavenly city comes down.** It is a triumph of grace, it is God's gift. "Not by works that anyone should boast." (Eph.2)

A big, inclusive city

There is an old joke about the Christian Reformed, or Canadian Reformed, or Baptist or Pentecostal or Catholic or Anglican person who dies and goes to heaven and is taken on a tour. Our friend is led down a long hall way filled with rooms. Inside each room is a great crowd of others. Finally they arrive at his particular 'door'. Ssssh, says the angel, 'they think they are the only ones here!'

The city of God is radically inclusive. It is 24,000 km cubed (21:16)

All along John has been working with and echoing and tweaking the prophets. In John 21:3 he quotes Ezekiel 37:27, "My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'. But John modifies the last word, 'they shall be my **peoples**.

Later in 22:2 John does it again. The tree of life in the new Jerusalem will be for the healing of the **nations**. The dream of Isaiah in 19:23-25 that all the old enemies of God's people will be claimed and brought in (Egypt and Assyria) comes true at last.

A beloved, beautiful, bridal city

We have seen this before. 'coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.'

The people of God as the bride is about celebration, festivity, fulfillment and intimate union. The beauty of the bride is an eternal affirmation of **all that is beautiful**.

The world is 'charged with the glory of God'. (GM Hopkins)

The beauty of this world is transformed. The city shines with the self-giving and self-receiving glory of God. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. The beauty of this world becomes the vehicle to express the beauty of the Eternal City.

A Holy City

'Holy' basically means 'other'. We may think of it being first about moral acts. But holiness is about 'other'. God is holy, he is other. That is, God alone of all that we ever see or experience has **not** been created.

So 'holy' means 'other'. If you are reaching into the snack cupboard, you see something good and just as you are about to grab it, your mother says, 'Uh, uh! I am saving those for Christmas'. She has just said, 'those are holy'. They are not for every day snacking.

So when God calls us to live holy lives, he is calling us to live for an 'other' direction, an 'other' purpose, not to go with the flow, or go with the pattern of this world.

Now maybe you see a problem coming here.

That means that 'holy' needs 'unholy', just as 'wet' needs 'dry' or as 'winner' needs 'loser'. How can the city be 'Holy'?

It turns out that the new Jerusalem still has a wall, and still has 'outsiders'. But, be careful, the wall has gates that are always open. Somehow, paradoxically, in the holy city everyone wins, there are no losers. Holiness expands to include all of reality.

An active city

Some of us get a bit uneasy when we think of heaven or of the new heavens and earth as a church service that never ever gets to the blessing. Singing forever?

Really?

The city is active. John gives us two big hints:

22:3 His servants shall worship/serve him.

22:5 'they shall reign for ever and ever'.

These two pictures pull together real life is all about. Worship and work. The CRC news feed told the story this week of a woman named Grace, in Sudan. She had been helped by Christian Reformed World Relief. She went to the biggest church she could find. There was a large offering box at the front. When others were bringing gifts forward, Grace went forward and climbed right in. She said that she wanted to make the statement that she was offering her whole life to the Lord.

Worship and work will come together. The new heavens and earth will be full of things to learn and do and grow.

So what?

The gift becomes an assignment. “If this is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God, is finally going, then every thought, move, deed in some other direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted.”

This is the program. Get with the program.

Open yourself to the presence of God.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Whatever you do, do it as a service to Jesus.

Include and welcome others. Especially your enemies.

Open yourself to beauty. Be holy.

The picture we are given is our compass for life right now.

The Lord be gracious to you.

The Lord be gracious to me.

And all God’s people said, Amen.