



"City of God"

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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Revelation 21:1-7, 22: 1-5

It is a shame that our understanding of the book of Revelation is laced with such fear and perplexity that it so often keeps us from really diving deep into its waters to discern what the book has to offer us as a church. I myself am no scholar on Revelation. I don't enjoy conversations about the end times or the final judgment, mostly because I'm still just trying to figure out what today is all about. And though I don't know this for a fact, I would suspect that Revelation is not often preached probably because there are so few passages that you can really isolate to draw a sermon out of without scaring away your congregation before you finish the scripture reading. But for all of its confounding imagery there are some images that are quite beautiful and a little easier for us to understand. Today's reading is one of them. It comes at the culmination of the entire book, after the battle between good and evil has been fought and God has emerged victorious, and after those who have remained faithful and haven't sold out to Satan despite their suffering and persecution and death even are left standing together at the end of time with their Lord. The passage is from Revelation 21:1-7 and Revelation 22: 1-5. It is John's vision of the new creation.

I would think that this image of the new creation would be like food for the soul for those early churches whose faces were still very much wet with tears when they received a record of this vision from the now exiled follower of Jesus named John. You see, at the time of its writing, about 90 years after Christ's death, it was open season on Christians because they refused to worship the Roman emperor as God and this was a very big problem for all. Their persecution ranged from the economic to the absurd, with stories coming out of this time of Christian businesses being shut out of the public sphere to Christians themselves being dipped in oil, tied to stakes, and set ablaze to illumine the gardens of Nero Caesar during his evening soirees. And so the impression of these times was as vivid and horrible as the impressions made by some of the images in the book of Revelation and that's pretty much the idea. If the Bible is like a library with different books appealing to their readers in different ways, then Revelation appeals to our imaginations in hopes that it will form an impression on us that will elicit a reaction and then motivate a response. And in the battle between good and evil that Revelation describes the impression of evil is certainly as vivid and real as it would have been for those early congregants called to stand their ground against it each and every day. But so then is the impression of the ultimate defeat of evil quite vivid as well, forming an impression of the final triumph of good that stands as a cause for perseverance and a call to hope.

For emerging out of the dust of the battle, descending from the clouds as a great gift to all of heaven and earth that has endured great suffering, is a new creation. A great city of God unlike anything the world's aching eyes had ever seen, and whose kingdom would have no end...About a year ago one of our congregants told me that he had to run into the office one Saturday and took his young daughter with him. Having set up a fort in the corner of the room she now sat and stared out the window enjoying a lollipop while he worked away. "Daddy," she asked, "Where does God live?" Sensing that this was one of those great teaching moments he set down his pen and explained that God was in heaven and that heaven was way above the clouds and that you couldn't see it, but Jesus told us it was there and said that we would go there when we died so that we could be with God. He turned back to work feeling pretty pleased as his daughter was clearly giving this some thought. After a couple moments of silence, still slurping on the lollipop

and now gazing up to the sky she said with a reflective tone, “You know, Daddy, I bet God lives in a big ole’ pink house up there.”

Up to this point there had always been something separating us from fully understanding God. Some chasm of space and time that forever kept humanity from seeing God face to face and meeting him where he lived but now, John describes, in this new creation, the home of God will be among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people. As a seal set on their foreheads, God will claim them for his own. They will not only glimpse God, but also have an audience with God since the division of heaven and earth will be forfeited for a new and holy city, where God’s glory alone will light the way.

With our own cheeks still wet with tears it seems that this vision of a new heaven and new earth that John describes can cause our hearts to ache as much or perhaps even more than it can make them feel full of hope. Perhaps because it feels just so far away. For though we may not fear for our lives on account of our faith, we certainly do know what it means to hunger for righteousness, and to look with longing for that river with the water of life that can quench the thirst within us that we do not even know to name. In the thick of grief God can seem so far removed up on his throne in heaven when we long to meet him face to face, for him to wipe the tears from our eyes and not only tell us but make it so that death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for those things of this world and of our broken, finite human condition have finally passed away so we need not fear loss any longer or have our hearts break because of it. Flip on the news and before us in high definition is the need for that blossoming tree of life whose leaves are the healing of the nations. Look around at the chasm between rich and poor, black and white, sickness and health, needs and gluttonous wants and our own souls join the chorus of the saints that cried out in the first century, ‘how long?’ How long, oh Lord, until your justice will have the final word? How long until we can dwell in your city and see you face to face?

This longing for God and vision of hope is an ancient one. Long before the vision of John the prophet Isaiah foretold the reign of this kingdom, the new Jerusalem, city of God. He writes, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered... for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight... no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth...They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat...my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity...before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear...they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”¹

As Christians with longing hearts since the day the stone was rolled away to reveal the empty tomb we are invited to live in that tension of the ancient hope in that which is still yet to

¹Isaiah 65:17-25

come in the long awaited new creation, and that which is very much here as those who believe that in Jesus Christ God's presence has already, in fact, been brought radically near. For in Christ the dividing walls between God and us are torn down and we no longer wonder what is the true heart of God but know it has walked among us in the flesh. We may long for his voice but in the scriptures we hear his Word speak truth about his kingdom here on earth and our part in claiming it. And though we do not know his distinct features we certainly recognize the face in one another. So God may indeed be in that big pink house up in heaven. But he is also in Jesus Christ right here with us- his holiness established in the middle of the world, and right in the middle of our hearts.

At the end of his life Saint Augustine, who had written volumes about the Christian life, had a vision of God on his deathbed. Afterwards he said if it, "All my words were like straw in the wind and the light." Perhaps we could use to live with a vision like this in mind ourselves- a vision that reminds us that we worship a God whose glory will ultimately make all those things we deem so important seem like grass in light of his power and presence. It may be a glimpse of paradise that we see in the revelation to John. But with the witness of Christ in hand and knowing that he is among us, I can't help but think that we are called not just to a longing in our hearts, but to somehow try and reflect this paradise today. Though the danger is real and the pains we endure almost debilitating, though we will surely get hurt and taken for a ride, I cannot help but believe that we can begin to try to live out, today, the kind of community and relationship with God that has been revealed to one day be our final destiny.

John excites our imaginations to form an impression, knowing that we will react, and hoping that we respond. I invite you to imagine stepping out of this sanctuary onto a street that is lit not by the sun, but by the radiance of God. To believe that he is seated on his throne at the intersection of Trade and Tryon- towering high above the Bank of America building, pouring glory into the streets that are streaming not with traffic but with the river of the water of life. Drink deeply from this vision and see how you react. And pray for wisdom for how to respond. Things are not all well here, but if we take to heart that the fulfillment of God's purposes is centered on a holy city, then I believe we can also start to build a community that reflects God's paradise. For Christ promised to be with us until the close of the age, when all things will be made new and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. The Lord is present with us now and it is true that his presence is still yet to come. So let us begin to live as citizens of the city of God today. Amen.