

Windows to the World: The City of God

Revelation 21 and 22 (various)

May 1, 2016

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Rev. Pen Peery

Continuing our Windows to the World sermon series – where we are focusing on the stories the stained glass windows of our sanctuary tell, and how those stories prepare us to be Christ’s disciples as we leave this sanctuary and go out into the world – we turn our attention to the Preston Memorial Window which is to your left (or on the cover of your bulletin). The window was given as a memorial gift honoring the life and ministry of Dr. John Alexander Preston – a preacher with a fondness for preaching on John – who was the pastor of our church from 1893 until his death in 1896. Dr. Preston didn’t have a long pastorate here, but he is remembered for having a particular and deep concern for the men of the congregation who would spend their week travelling for work only to come back to this sanctuary on Sunday morning. This is the reason that bottom of the window reads, “Commercial Travelers.” Once a year, Dr. Preston would preach a special sermon directed at these men – and the “commercial travelers” were group who raised the money for the window to honor Dr. Preston after his death. The window tells the story of the last two chapters of the book of Revelation – a book that describes John’s vision for what the world will be. Listen with me for the word of God...

+++

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

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

For the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Then one of the seven angels said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the

earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

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 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

+++

We just heard a description of the New Jerusalem, but when I read this Scripture I can’t help thinking about the Old City. The Old City of Jerusalem is an amazing, and amazingly complicated place.

The city is a living, breathing archeological dig. History is stacked on top of history – sometimes giving you access to 2,000 year-old stones that Jesus walked upon, other times revealing 5,000 year-old tunnels dug into the bedrock below the city walls.

Today, the Old City is divided into quarters – all contained within thick walls that date back to the Ottoman Empire. The Jewish Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Arminian Quarter. At the boundary of each of those religious and ethnic quarters the atmosphere is tense.

Walking the city, you are surrounded by the sounds of the world gathered in one place. The call to prayer from a minaret of a mosque overlaps with the chants of a French, Catholic order at Mass, which overlaps with the low drone of orthodox Jews reading the Torah at the Western Wall. There’s nothing like it.

It was inside the Old City that I first saw police vests that held tear-gas canisters, as well as my first time seeing a stack of riot-shields. A lasting image was from the plaza of the Temple Mount, Islam’s third-most holy site that contains the Foundation Stone from which they believe Muhammad ascended into heaven – also the exact place where the First and Second Temple of the Jews stood – the place that held the Ark of the Covenant; and the place where Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers. On the Temple Mount I saw a group of Muslim children playing war with plastic guns – some acting as snipers – while they tolerated the Western infidels who were traipsing through their playground.

One of the many reasons there continues to be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is because no one is willing to cede ownership of the Holy City of Jerusalem. The word Jerusalem literally means “foundation for peace,” which is an ironic way to describe a city that has been contested for more than 5,000 years.

And as powerful as my experience was of that amazing and chaotic city, I confess to wondering what kind of future is possible amidst so much conflict. I couldn’t help but wonder how the Old City of Jerusalem will ever give way to the New Jerusalem that we read about this morning.

+ + +

Being in Jerusalem gave me a new appreciation about what a city represents in Scripture. Because in Scripture, geography matters.

Mountains represent places where people experience the holy – Mount Sinai is where Moses meets God to receive the 10 Commandments, Jesus is transfigured on a mountain, a mountain is where Jesus ascends into heaven. Wilderness is where God’s people are tested – the Israelites wandered for 40 years before God delivered them to the Promised Land, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted.

In Scripture, cities are places of conflict. From Babel to Jerusalem to Athens to Rome – cities are places that mix people, and power, and ideas that so often lead to hubris and injustice and, often, violence.

And cities are type-cast as problem centers in places beyond Scripture. Those of us who work or live or worship in uptown Charlotte laugh about it, but there still are people who are afraid to come into the city. They get scared off by the traffic, or by the crowds of people, or by the homeless. Many people tend to feel safer in the suburbs, or their gated communities, or in the country. It derives from the same principle: that the city is a place of conflict and danger; a failed experiment in what it looks like for so many people trying to live together.

Think about the problems that threaten our city: There is economic inequality that has made national headlines. We are arguing about how to assign our students to public schools in a way that doesn’t reinforce the reality of how isolated our communities are – racially and socio-economically. We are in the eye of the storm of debates around House Bill 2 – a conversation supercharged with ethical, economic, and generational conflicts. We fight over the best methods of transportation: trolleys, toll-lanes, and multi-modal stations. We worry about balancing hospitality with public safety.

It can be a hard thing – to live together in a city.

And it almost makes you wonder why, if God could dream any vision of the future, why the vision that God gave for John to write down and share with the church was of a city.

Take a look at the window again. John is sitting, holding a scroll to write down the vision that God's gives him, and he is looking up, beyond the clouds, into heaven, for a sign of what the future will look like when everything is in line with God's will and purpose.

What would you wish for if you were John?

That God would whisk you away – up into the clouds?

Away from this place where there are problems, and pain?

Away from the world that so often fails to reflect what God intended when God created it?

Instead of being rescued from the earth into the heavens, the vision that John receives about the future is a picture of what it looks like for the heavens to come to the earth. That's really important for us to recognize. God's vision for the future is not that we would evacuate this fallen place...God's vision is that this place will be renewed!

New Testament scholar Eugene Boring makes a point to highlight that what John is told in this vision is not that God will make all new things, but that God will make all things new.

So John wrote:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...
and I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven,
like a bride adorned for her husband...*

God's ultimate dream is of a city – not a mystical city set off in the clouds – but a real city that descends from the heavens into this world –

Where people from the nations are welcome and will gather...

Where the gates will never be shut because there will be nothing to fear...

Where there is healing – for the physically, economically, and socially wounded...

Where the people bring their best selves – in ways that glorify and honor God...

What are we to make of such a vision?

Do we bide our time and trust that it will – one day – appear?

Brian Blount, professor and president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, suggests that the reason God gives us this vision is to allow the future to pull us from the present.

“John shows [us] the future of [our] relationship with God – pictured in the new Jerusalem –so that [we] can act now in ways that will enable [us] to participate in such a relationship then.”¹

If this is the future – promised by God – a city of hospitality, and civility, and equality, and holiness, and healing – then our present is where God calls us to work to prepare for that future.

God’s promise is not to make all new things.

God’s promise is to make all things new!

+ + +

This mission of this church is inextricably linked to the heart of this city. In 1815 the town commissioners set aside the land on which we now sit to be a church for Charlotte. Originally, this church was to be a place of prayer for all people – regardless of denomination.

When the allure of an easier life in the suburbs grew in the 1950s the leadership of this church recommitted themselves to stay here and be Christ’s hands and feet in the city.

Today, as we think strategically about how to be For Christ in the Heart of a Charlotte with all of it’s growth, and promise, and problems – our call remains the same.

I know there is temptation to be overwhelmed by the problems we face.
I know there is temptation to lose hope.

But hope is the essence of the Christian faith. And in the end, ours is a faith that does not give in to cynicism; it does not submit to despair.

Our faith calls us to something better.
We know how the story ends – it ends with redemption and completion.

I believe with every piece of my heart that right now, even today, we are a part of the creation that God will transform into the new heaven and the new earth.

Because of this, we are called – not to sit idly by and wait for God’s redemption – but to invest ourselves in the world and in this city. We are called – not to despair the state of things – but keep our eyes open for the evidence of God’s kingdom.

We believe – sometimes against all evidence to the contrary – that Jesus is Lord. We believe that God is in control.

So away with fear.

¹ Blount, Brian, Revelation (p. 375).

Away with cynicism and despair.

Away with feeling that the best days are behind.

We are called to live in anticipation of God's new heaven and new earth.

We are called to walk by the light of God's promise.

Amen.