

Sunday, May 1, 2016
Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5

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The Beautiful City

Where do you dream of living? Where is your ideal location? Out in the country like Tom and Andrea Unzicker? Or on a farm like Chuck and Rose Moyer? Maybe an urban farm like where Kimberly Schmidt and Joel Linscheid, or Nathan and Ola Buhr live? If it's city living you prefer, which city is best? Kansas City? Tulsa? Seattle? New York? Perhaps a Canadian city? Or somewhere in Scotland? Or how about Jerusalem? What would constitute a perfect city in your mind? I'm pretty sure none of us would be completely content with Wichita as it is – we can think of LOTS of things about our own fair city we would like to change!

The writer of this text in Revelation was dreaming – some think, literally, seeing a vision – about a perfect city. Some of you might recall what's in the verses that were left out of this reading – the detailed description of the streets paved with gold and the bejeweled walls and gates of the New Jerusalem. Raise your hand if you have heard this text used at a funeral to describe heaven; the place where our loved one now abides. There was a time when this text was understood to be useful only in another time period – another so-called dispensation. For now, its only use was to help us understand how heaven looks – a place we'll see sometime in the future after we've died, if we've been good enough and if we've lived right. More recently, theologians agree that yes, the writer WAS dreaming, but not dreaming as in sleeping and having a dream. Dreaming as in imagining, wishing, hoping, seeing a vision of the kingdom of God in its fullness, not in some far-off ethereal location, but here, on this earth, with God's people helping to create it.

The writer of this fantastic dream lived in a time when everyone had to swear their allegiance to Caesar. Not exclusively – it was ok to be loyal to Yahweh, too, or Jupiter or to your own, personal household gods, or to any of the other plentiful gods of first century Rome. But to refuse to worship Caesar, the human leader who was also considered a god, was understood to be unpatriotic and could be punishable by death. In ancient Rome, religious expression had nothing to do with a person's behavior and everything to do with how religiously they followed and performed the rituals. It was a sort of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" game with the gods. People had their gods' statues in their homes and offered them food and drink – or whatever it was they believed the gods wanted, and then, it was understood, that in exchange, the gods would grant whatever the people requested.

It was also a time of great disparity between the very rich and the very poor. The very rich were fewer in number, but held the power and mostly lived outside of the city in luxurious, sprawling estates. The very poor were many and lived in cramped, volatile and often dangerous situations stacked on top of each other in the city. They were held captive by their poverty and hope was a sparse commodity.

Revelation was written during a time when the young Christians, followers of The Way, as they were called, posed a threat both to the Roman establishment who represented the big government money AND to the Jewish establishment – the big religious money. Both were powerful forces that maintained the status quo, ensuring that those in power would stay in power and those without power would remain powerless. The Jesus followers would pledge their allegiance *only* to Jesus. The book of Revelation was, in part, an encouragement to stay resolute and keep the faith, to not take their eyes off the prize.

The book of Revelation was written in the midst of injustice and suffering, to be comforting and hopeful. In the midst of the Pax Romana, the “peace of Rome” that was established and maintained through military might, this letter was a reminder to cling tightly to Jesus’ way of peace with justice. In the darkness of the crooked politicians that surrounded them, this vision encouraged them to focus on the light that is Jesus and that is reflected by his followers. In the crippling tangle of old understandings about inclusion and exclusion, clean and unclean, saved and damned, John wrote to the church, so that we would remember that WE ARE the city of God!

This vision is a reminder that God’s kingdom is unfolding right now, through us – obviously, it’s not complete yet, but there’s current construction going on, there are orange cones everywhere and we’re all construction workers! The church and everyone who is a part of it is a sign – a sign to the watching world that our hope is in God; we are each, and together, the temple in which God dwells. We are the light, reflecting God’s glory. Each time we make a decision to include people and show them the grace and mercy that has been shown to us by God, we are creating this beautiful city. When we reach out to folks who don’t look like us or who worship differently than we do or people whose gender identity isn’t clear, when we reach across those boundaries and value human beings because they’re made in God’s image, just like we are – then we are fulfilling this biblical vision.

When we welcome refugees, we are bathing them in the river of the water of life. When we work together with a dozen other churches to offer housing and support for homeless families we are participating in the healing of the nations. When we raise our voices and speak for those who have no voice, when we risk our own sense of safety and security to stand between those who are threatened and those doing the threatening, we are showing the world a new, different way to respond. When we walk with each other and pray for one another through difficult times, we are shining God’s light for the world to see.

The New Jerusalem is a beautiful metaphor for The Church, the community of faith that is already part of the new heaven and the new earth and God will continue to bring it to its fullness and completion. This letter is, indeed, a revelation to us of our incredible opportunities to participate, to co-create with God this New Jerusalem, this beautiful city. It’s the ideal location for all of us - let’s not waste any time; let’s build it! The hymn of response is in the HWB, No. 323. Thanks to Vern for suggesting it.