

NEW HOPE: CITY OF LIFE

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, May 19, 2019

Scripture: [Revelation 21: 1–6, 22–25](http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Revelation+21:1-6,22-25) (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Revelation+21:1-6,22-25>)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today we're going to hear from the culmination of the Revelation to John, the Apocalyptic final book of the Bible. Revelation is a wild and wondrous book, but one that has suffered a lot at the hands of interpreters and misinterpreters, readers, and absorbers of its images and visions.

Revelation gets a lot of play in our culture. It's in lots of spooky stories, in science fiction, in disaster movies. You can tell why when I give you its Greek name: *Apocalypse*, which actually doesn't mean the end of the world... it means something like *unveiling*. It's a letter to 7 churches trying to figure out how to live in their cities, in their communities, and in the Roman empire that surrounded them, demanding loyalty to its own civic religion... and it's a letter reminding those churches what they're living for.

There are warnings and encouragements, visions of beasts and of monsters, of the throne of God, of a woman who conquers a serpent, and of Jesus leading an army that never fights, but always wins...

At the end, they find a healing and hope in a city:

SERMON

It's a fact of life that language is not always up to the task for the experience of being human. I can't fully describe to you the best dinner I've ever had. The whole reason we have poets is so they can bend and push the language to try and convey something that could never flow out of our basic everyday constructions.

If we can't quite cover the content of our every day, I think we're safe in saying the bible's words in its text, then, are not adequate to contain the fullness of God's promises in our faith: what it will look like when God's wholeness is all in all.

To *try* and make these promises clear, our scriptures tell two **big** stories in images about God's work in the world. One in a garden. One in a city. The Bible starts in a garden, and things go wonky... and then Mary Magdalene finds the risen Jesus in a garden... and we see something near the wholeness of God's life and love.

In the same way, we get a tower of Babel... and we get King David ruling over the city of Jerusalem... and things fall apart... and then this final image of the entire bible in Revelation assures us that Jerusalem, that the city, will be made new and complete God's work.

I am... maybe not surprisingly to you, a city person. Now, I live in Maine, and I am learning to appreciate the garden we live in... but some part of me is still well fed wedged in between a valley of concrete. So, I think I come by my fascination honestly, both from that comfort... and, well, I was born, and grew up in, a city that was built on blueprints in this scripture. New Haven, CT was literally designed to match the dimensions given in Revelation. Our ancestors were *weird* and they took this book *seriously*.

We should, too. **This is the story in mystical language responding to the question: where, and to whom, do we belong as Christians?** Put another way, it's about faith and politics.

It stood as a message to churches that were trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus, all while living in the richest, most military empire that had ever been. One that regularly asked its citizens to worship the empire itself, its army, and its leaders. It also stood as a message to those who had been rejected, oppressed.

The message is this: don't lose your citizenship in the city of heaven just cause it feels like you're stuck in the baggage claim of the empire of this world. Don't give up and go along to get along...

See, Rome was more than glad to accept new populations into its fold, including the early church. Their common religion was more than glad to accept new gods... they had bunches already! But the trade was that your faith, your God, had to fit into their cosmos of worship, where gods fit in and revolved around the center of worship: the empire itself, its army, and above all the emperor, signified by the eagle, whose name was Son of God and King of Kings, and who demanded your worship.

Do you start to see how dangerous the language of our early church was? How calling Jesus, a poor man from Judea, put to death on a cross... Son of God... was a way to laugh in the face of Caesar, and proclaim God's rule above all?

So this image of the city shows the early church the promise they live into. God will renew. God will be the center of their lives. God will wipe away every tear of living in occupation.

And, just to be clear: Heaven comes to earth, and renews earth... it does not replace earth.

Because, the new, holy city of Jerusalem, comes *down*, comes to this earth right here... its light, its center, its source of living water is God's presence. It is a radical symbol of being, once and for all, out of the king business. Out of the politics of power business, and into the politics of the polis, the care and comfort and wholeness of all people. It is also out of the temple business, the worship of idols, and images of big dudes on mountain tops, flags and eagles, and all that... all that replaced by the worship of God come to dwell in us all in humanity and humility.

And just for the garden folks: I don't think you have to lose the garden... The image here is of a city, but its highest value is that connection and community, one that we can now just as easily hold up in nature, where the infrastructure of roots and rivers feed a vast population of earth creatures living and coexisting in all the complexities of an apartment block.

This Jerusalem (in nature or in structures of our designing) is a radical image that is unveiled: if we are going to be citizens of this life, this new city, this new heaven... we have to ask ourselves, what do citizens of this city do while we live in our cities as they are? Because you can have a death penalty, but you are a citizen of a city where death will be no more. We can debate immigration policy in our states and in our country, but we are citizens of a city where the gates are always open by day and *there is no such thing as night*. We have work to do on environmental policy and clean water for all people at every level of government, but we are citizens in a place where the water always flows, and it gives and sustains life.

This city where God dwells in and with us, where God is our light, our water... calls us to live a different kind of citizenship: one where we know that the children of the Mbabaali School in Uganda are children of our city, and call us to love and serve them with James through our missions. One where we speak out loudly when others insist that our Christian worship must bend to worship of civic leaders who distort faith for their own gain, who insist that we worship militarism itself. So we go this day to celebrate the ways in which Jesus did build bridges and connection... that this city that calls us to connection and promises that all the first things that used to divide and destroy us will pass away...

This city of God, *Revelation* insists... not only *will* be our home.... **it is our home now**. It calls our allegiance, our joy, and our struggle... so, rejoicing in God's promise and God's presence let us go out to the world's gardens and cities... to make them new with God's spirit. Amen.