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The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Acts 16:9-15
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
John 14:23-29
Psalm 67

What the New Jerusalem is like

Recently a father was hiking in a nearby state park with his two young children. Until very recently, they had lived in an urban area and the kids were unfamiliar with nature, unfamiliar with being “in the wild,” so to speak. At one point, deep in the woods, the father stopped them to tell them to listen. Listen to the quiet of nature. Listen: the only thing you can hear is the wind blowing through the top of the trees in its fluctuating whisper. The kids listened closely. Then the younger child said, in amazement, “It sounds just like a white noise machine.”

A white noise machine is what they were used to, from birth, their parents having used them to block out the noise of car horns and construction and the general mayhem of the city. That is what was natural to them; the wind in the trees, though, was foreign and exotic.

This is funny in part because most of us have a sense that there is something real about being in the natural world, something even somewhat pure, or at least purer than the hustle and bustle of city life. Being in the woods is one way of “getting away from it all,” of re-centering and getting our bearings.

This attitude toward cities is shared with much of the Old Testament. The ancient Hebrews were suspicious of cities, or at least their proto-cities. You’ll remember that, at the beginning of Genesis, the original paradise was the Garden of Eden, not the city of Eden. The first city was named Enoch, founded by Cain, after he had killed his brother Abel. The second city mentioned in Genesis is Nineveh, and the Ninevehites were archenemies of the Hebrews. The third city is Babel, where they tried to build the Tower of Babel, and the Lord scattered them. The fourth is Sodom, where some bad things happened, et cetera. Jerusalem is the exception that proves the rule. It was the place God where was to live with his people, but much of the Biblical reports of the Hebrews in Jerusalem is about their infidelity to God, which leads to the destruction of Jerusalem and their separation from it.

This suspicion of city life changes in the New Testament. It is a clear shift. You can see this change in attitude in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. There some of Paul’s missionary journeys are described, and it is a litany of the cities they went to: Samothrace; Neapolis; Philippi. But you don’t have to read Acts to know this: half of the New Testament is named after cities. Ephesians is Paul’s letter to the Christians in Ephesus; Corinthians to Christians in Corinth, Romans, Colossians, Galatians, and so forth.

But the climax of this shift is in the book of Revelation. This is my first point for today. Because what John is given a preview of is at the end of days, and at the climax of history, in the fullness of time, when heaven comes down to earth, heaven is a city. The angel takes him up to a mountain so he can see it, “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.” In case there is any doubt about it, the very word “city” is used several times in these last chapters of

Revelation to describe the New Jerusalem. In the New Testament understanding, heaven isn't a garden and it isn't a state park. It may not be exclusive of those things, but they aren't its main feature. Whatever else heaven is, in the Biblical imagination, it isn't about getting away from it all. If one's idea of heaven is escaping from human relationships, there isn't warrant for that idea in Scripture. In Revelation, heaven is a city.

There are a bunch of strange things about this city. One of them is that it's really beautiful, covered with jewels and gems. Another is that there aren't any churches in it. To a certain segment of people, that may be very attractive. But that is to think about things the wrong way around. We build and inhabit churches because they are places set aside for the worship of God. Coming to church is a time set aside for the worship of God. In the New Jerusalem, there doesn't have to be a place or time set aside for worshipping God: the entire place is set aside for worshipping God; there is no time set aside, but it is all the time. For us, setting aside a place and time for worship is (in part) about thanking God for what he has given us, which is everything. It is how we participate in the worship of heaven. You don't go to church because you like it, though you might. You go to church because God has given you everything, and so you set aside a fraction of your time to thank God. In the New Jerusalem, however, everything is part of thanking God. That is why there is so much singing in it, so much music. The dimensions of the New Jerusalem, as given in the book of Revelation, are multiples of the Old Testament dimensions of the holy sanctuary in the Temple. The New Jerusalem itself is the expanded sanctuary of the Temple. The redeemed city itself is where God dwells, and where he is praised.

But, because it is where God dwells, all the time, among his people, there is a clear exclusivity to the New Jerusalem. This is my second point: the New Jerusalem is exclusive. Revelation describes the standard: "nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood." There is no lying in the New Jerusalem; there are no falsehoods. It is the place where only the truth is told. It is a holy city for holy people, and the sins that mark human social relationships these days have no place there, and so those who commit the sins that mark human social relationships have no place there.

But, before he says this about exclusivity, he says this about inclusivity: there are gates around this city, yes, that demarcate inside from outside. Usually we use gates to keep people out. (Good fences make good neighbors.) But these gates are open during the day ... and it is never night. It is like a gated community, but the gates are never closed. The New Jerusalem stands there as a perpetual invitation to live with God, in a place without sin. Dishonesty is the mark of social life in the time of this present darkness. But there is no dishonesty, and no darkness, in the New Jerusalem.

Importantly, the comment about the inclusivity of the New Jerusalem precedes the comment about its exclusivity. The important thing is that the gates are always open: if you want to live there, you can; anyone who wants to be there can be. However, sin has no place there, and no one who practices falsehood. Therefore, if you want to live in the New Jerusalem, you can, but you have to give up abominations and falsehoods, because they are excluded.

But how in the world do we do that? We who are marked by the stain of original sin. We who are enmeshed in a world of abominations and falsehoods and can't seem to get away from them as hard as we try. It sometimes seems that we are mired in our sin and our hearts are ugly. We do what we don't want to do, and we don't do what we want to do. What chance we do have then?

I think of that old-timey hymn, "Just as I am, without one plea." We come up to the gates of the New Jerusalem, just as we are, without one plea. Marked by sin and fluent in falsehood as our first language. We come just as we are, without one plea. Except for this one, the hymn says. "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." Without one plea for ourselves except for this one: that Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for sinners. Christ died so that when we

are judged, the judge doesn't see any abominations or falsehood. He sees innocence and purity because of Christ. Washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. In his death is the forgiveness that justifies our entrance into this land of light and life.

"Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." It's an old-timey hymn of the old-time religion, and it's exactly right. It is Christ who makes the exclusive inclusive.

My first point about this passage from Revelation was how it mentions that heaven is a city, with the social relationships of cities. The second point is that the city is described as being both fully exclusive and fully inclusive. Completely exclusive of sin and sinners, completely inclusive of all forgiven sinners, and forgiveness is offered to all.

My third and final point comes from the end of the passage, from a short comment John makes, and it ties these two together. John sees a river, flowing from God's throne. And, on the banks of the river are the tree of life. This tree of life has twelve kinds of fruit (unlike the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, which only had one kind of fruit). But then John says, "The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

This is a funny thing to say about heaven. If there is a tree there that offers healing, it means that there is healing that needs to be accomplished. Which, again, means that heaven isn't a matter of getting away from it all. It means that reconciliation between people isn't something that happens instantaneously, at the snap of a finger. It's a process, and it's a process that requires relationships being formed (like in cities) and the truth being told (exclusive of sin and falsehood).

In other words, healing is something that continues into the time after time. Hurts don't disappear just because we want them to. They don't disappear. We see preview of this in the gospels: the risen Christ ascends to heaven at the end of the gospel with the wounds of his crucifixion still fresh. Christ's wounds don't disappear, even after he proclaims peace to his disciples. It is reflected in the fact that the Lamb that John sees in heaven isn't a spry and sprightly spring lamb. It is a Lamb that looks like it had been slain, which it had, on the cross.

We see this dynamic happening in our current world as well. On a national scale, the most dramatic twentieth-century example of it is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formed in South Africa after the era of apartheid. The perpetrators of apartheid were offered amnesty if they would be truthful about what activities they had participated in. Through that truthfulness, and only through the honesty and relationship (however tenuous) between perpetrator and victim, reconciliation could be effected. Note that it was called the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," not the "Reconciliation and Truth Commission." The truth comes first. There can be no falsehood in this heavenly city if healing is going to be attained.

We see this on personal levels as well. The eighth step in the 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous program is making a list of the people the alcoholic has harmed; the ninth step is trying to make amends with them. This is a matter of telling the truth about what has happened, telling the truth about history.

But, as we all know, just trying to make amends doesn't always—can't always—restore a relationship fully or accomplish full reconciliation. Things are not that simple. The restoration of those damaged relationships may have to wait until we can sit together under the leaves of the tree of life, with the time to tell the truth and the whole truth, with God as our help and our witness.

As we come to the end of the book of Revelation—as we come to the end of the entire epic of the Bible and Biblical history—as we come to the Bible's climactic moment, with its images of the fulfillment of the promises made all the way back to Abraham, the plan set in motion from the first moment of Adam's disobedience; from the very beginning of creation, God was moving slowly but unstopably to this moment that John sees, and we are given a vision of what redemption looks like, what the thing is that this is all leading to, what it is that we have to look forward to after everything

that comes after—as we get John’s glimpse of heaven here, we are a long, long way from the idea of heaven of cherubs on a cloud.

Revelation isn’t the only way to describe the end times. It’s a vision of John, half in reverie, in imagistic and fantastical language. But when the Lord simplifies the great mysteries enough so that we can understand, by speaking in the words of Scripture, this is how it is talked about.

I mention all of this because what we think the end is going to be like is going to shape how we live today. If we think that our ultimate destination is about “getting away from it all,” then we’re going to value human relationships, even human lives, in a certain way. If we see that the consummation of the world is entirely social, then we’ll value those things differently right now, and we might look, in our human relationships, for places where we see glimpses of heavenly social life—without lying or duplicity; with charity toward all and malice toward none;* where we love one another the way that Christ has loved us.

If we think that the New Jerusalem is a place of ceaseless praise, then we might recognize our worship services as imitations—pale imitations, granted—of that heavenly worship, as little pieces of heaven on earth. We might think of our prayer lives differently.

If we recognize that even in heaven there is healing to be done, the healing of the nations and its people, then we might want to go ahead and get started on that. We might want to be part of truth and reconciliation, in commissions or otherwise. Making amends. Binding up the wounds of the wounded and giving help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless. Asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness. This will all be partial, but it is how we get ready for heaven and see a bit of it on earth.

In the meantime, we can hold on to this promise that John recounts: that there will be a day when we can sit with our brothers and sisters—those whom we love and those whom we have to learn to love; those whom we need to forgive and those we need to forgive us—talking quietly, telling the truth, and enjoying the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves of the tree. And those leaves, and that tree, and those conversations, and that truth, will heal the world: they will heal us, and heal our fellow citizens of the New Jerusalem. And it’s okay if, to some, that wind, blowing through those healing leaves, sounds something like a white noise machine.

* The conclusion of Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”