

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Year C
May 26, 2019

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

Years ago, when I served a congregation in Topeka, one brave woman in the Sunday night Bible study vociferously suggested the Book of Revelation for our next subject. Then, since I was already doing work for the Sunday night group, I also decided the two Bible study groups I led at senior housing community would also do Revelation. It was less prep time for me, and the senior groups didn't much care what we did as long as I led it and it involved the Bible.

In one of the first sessions with the senior groups, I unrolled a sketch I had done for the Sunday night group based on John's initial description of his heavenly vision in the first chapter of Revelation. It was done on a big sheet of flip chart paper with markers ... outlines of twenty-four chairs each with a golden crown on it, (representing the twenty-four elders who bow and offer their crowns during the heavenly worship) arranged in a big ring ... the throne of God in the center, shrouded by a cloud ... surrounded by a sea drawn in blue and lined to suggest its glassy appearance ... the seven lampstands before the throne, each topped with an orange and yellow flame ... and the four living creatures with their wings and varied faces (and for once, I actually did a good job on the faces – even the human one).

As I unrolled the sketch on the table in the community room at the senior apartment building, Norma looked at it and said, "Ugh! What's that supposed to be?" I said, "Heaven." "Well that doesn't look like how I picture it," she replied. "Of course, it doesn't," I explained to Norma; "it's John's picture, not yours."

Now Norma's eyesight was really bad by that point. And she had always been a very critical and negative person. But I was willing to cut her some slack on this one because the blunt truth of the matter is that the way John describes heaven throughout the Book of Revelation is not how we've been taught to picture it at all. Down through the ages, artists of various generations ... Bible illustrators ... script writers ... set designers ... special effects producers have given us a very different picture: one of fluffy clouds everywhere, white robes and halos and wings for everyone...maybe harps, too...soft lighting for a warm, fuzzy glow...reunions with our loved ones gone before...but mostly ultimate wish fulfillment: anything and everything we want, when we want it, the way we want it.

This is not John's descriptions of the Kingdom of Heaven, the fulfillment of God's Reign and Realm at all. John's descriptions are jewel-bright in full color with the radiance and splendor of precious gems, shining like gold, sparkling like crystal. The cloud shrouding the throne of God is more a haze of too-bright brilliance than puffy white cumulus clouds we see in the sky.

In the reading for Revelation today, John is carried in his spirit by the Holy Spirit to a lofty, high mountain, which in the imagination of his time is where earth and heaven might intersect, and John is permitted to see the Holy City, named Jerusalem – but not to be confused with the actual city of Jerusalem, which had been razed and fully occupied by the Roman Imperial forces at this

point in time... and the oppressive actions of that empire, where are very much the context for John's Revelation. The reign of God comes to earth as a city. And if you think our modern cities are too dense, that city planners calling for even more density are nuts, well, density today has nothing on urban density as John knew it. Cities, as John knew them, were very densely packed, teeming with people. The Reign and Realm of God, as John describes it is not "just Jesus and me" or "just me and my loved ones floating on the clouds." It's a city, a community, with lots and lots and lots of people – all kinds of people.

But who's in there and who's out is not the focus. In the Holy City of God, there are gates ... which are open by day, like any other city's gates, but not shut at night, unlike every other city's gates, because there simply is no night – only day. No need for lamps or the moon to light the night because there is no night. No need for sun, either, because the light of the place comes from glory of God and the light of the Lamb.

Everybody comes in – all the peoples. Where we read the word *nation* the Greek has *ethnos*, which is where we get our words like *ethnic*. It just means *people* – all kinds of people and groups of people. Everybody is in, but everybody has to leave the junk outside ... the things that are false, the things that are profane or irreverent or contemptuous, the things are considered abominations ... which is scriptural shorthand for idolatry with all its polluting and contaminating effects. All of that has to be left outside; it just doesn't get in – period.

There is a broad street right down the center of the city, two lanes because there's a river running through the middle of it, the River of Life that has its origin at the throne of God. Since the Tree of Life grows on either side of this, we are looking at one big, massive tree – kind of like a bayan tree with roots and branches all over the place or that really big sequoia in Redwoods National Park that you can drive through like a tunnel. This is one huge, ginormous tree. It has to be. It bears a crop of fruit each month to feed everyone. But the leaves might be even better: the leaves provide the cure, the therapy that heals the people, the ethnics.

And there is no need for temples, shrines for the dwelling of a deity, because the whole city is the dwelling of God. God is there with the people. God as the only sovereign ruler, the only power that motivates, guides, and determines the course of life ... God reigning and ruling over every single thing that is. And the people of God see God face to face, the name of God on their foreheads, like the cross of Christ marked at your baptism. And you see God, face to face.

It kind of puts our fluffy, softly lit, hazy-focused pictures to flight, doesn't it? This is a description so big and huge and bold it almost defies imagination ... textures we can feel, fruit we can taste, a flowing river with a current we can hear, sparkles and brilliance to dazzle our sight ... deep green verdant leaves we can smell and feel.

This is where we're headed; this is what's coming our way. That is the promise of the whole Book of Revelation. Yes, times are hard, impossibly hard. Yes, the sufferings people are enduring are real. But God sees. God does see what the forces of empire and domination and oppression and consumption and markets and everything else we humans tend to look to as sources of goodness, good things, and help with our needs... God sees what these are doing. In fact, the suffering these forces inflict is of cosmic proportions. But God is also acting to

overturn, undo, and defeat these – and in the end, God wins. All the damage is undone. All evil is purged from everything. God’s dream from the dawn of creation is finally fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth. This is going to happen.

It may not look like it now. Sometimes it seems like the oppression and darkness and outright evil are winning way too much, too often. Sometimes it seems like the vision of the Reign and Realm of God is no more substantial than our fluffy, culturally conditioned images of heaven – comforting fantasies without any real substance. That’s the thing about visions. They guide us, but we need to look carefully because the realization of that vision might not look quite like we’re thinking.

Take, for example, what happens with Paul and his companions in our reading from Acts. Paul has a vision of a man pleading for him to come to Macedonia. So, he and his companions make a beeline for Philippi, the primary city in the region of Macedonia. Having had several days to look around the city and finding no synagogue or gathering place for Jews and/or God-fearing Gentiles, Paul and crew go outside the city along the river to see if people might be gathering there. It’s the sabbath, after all. Sure enough, there is a gathering – but it’s women, not men, with a leader named Lydia. If Paul had just been looking for men, he might have missed Lydia and the other women.

Blessedly, we are not left on all on our own in this. Jesus promised help to his followers, help that would come after he left them. “The Advocate,” we read ... but truth is, it’s hard to know quite what to make of the word. At its root, the word given to us as *advocate* means *one called to be alongside*. This promised Spirit is called to be with us, alongside us, to support and help us, to guide and teach us. The Spirit imparts the crystalline sparkle of the River of Life to the waters of the baptismal font as the promises of God join with the water of our daily life to become the very water of the River of Life, claiming us as residents of that Holy City, citizens of the Reign and Realm of God. The Spirit breathes into us the very air of that place, reminding us of our true home ... helping us catch glimpses of it here and now, now and then, like a familiar scent on the breeze, the flash of something in the corner of your eye

This vision of the Holy City is powerful one – meaty enough to sink your teeth into like the fruit of the Tree of Life, bright enough to light your way as you live toward that promised future that is already on its way to us. This Reign and Realm of God began with Jesus on the cross and the resurrection as proof-positive this new life is real, now, and coming to be in this world among God’s people. Your baptism marks you as a resident of the Holy City so that you can live out of that vision and into it as, together, we make our way through life toward the ultimate life in the City of God.

The Roman Empire of John’s day fell, as all such things inevitably do. Others have risen and fallen since and continue to do even today. The powers that work against the ways of God, the way of life in the Holy City, continue to oppress and harm and kill and destroy. But these powers cannot stand; the destruction that is wrought will rebound upon the wreakers. Those who speak falsehoods, who proclaim things as gods that are not God but are in fact idols of their own creation ... who want to invoke God’s name and blessing on things that are the speakers’ wills

and not the ways of God as reflected in the ways of Jesus and the life of this Holy City ... these will be silenced and the ways of God will stand forever and ever. So it is to be.

And in the meantime, which oftentimes is a very mean and cruel time, we gather as we do today here in this place ... with jewel bright colors catching the light and hinting at the colors and splendor of the Holy City ... our candles, which we don't need for the light, reminding of us the lampstands before the throne of God, that we are ever in God's sight ... water in our font, like a pool that's caught some of the overflow from the River of Life that flows from the throne of God ... a table where we gather and all are fed with a bit of bread, a sip of wine like crumbs dropping down from the wedding feast of the Lamb, just beyond our sight but is surely coming our way. These are powerful reminders that you belong to God; we belong to God and to each other; we are part of that bright shining Holy City. So it is to be. Amen.