

Sixth Sunday of Easter (c)
Acts 16:9-15 Revelation 21:10, 22--22:5 John 14:23-29
Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
May 22, 2022 [Traditional]

In our second lesson—from the end of the Bible—we're given this beautiful vision of heaven. This is the future that God has prepared for us in Jesus Christ, the kingdom that will ultimately take the place of this broken world. And notice how many images from the garden of Eden, way back in Genesis, return here at the end of the Bible. The river which flowed through Eden will flow through the eternal city. In Genesis, Adam and Eve were cut off from the tree of life. But now in the New Jerusalem, we see that the fruit of that tree will be available again to everyone. It will be for the healing of the nations.

The gulf that separates human beings from the source of their life will be gone. God, the origin and end of life, will be right there with us. We won't need God's light reflected to us through his creation, because we'll have his direct light. We won't need a Bible to tell us about him. I'll be looking for new work. Because God will be right there for us. The conflict between humanity and the Creator will be over. All our struggles will be done, our sicknesses healed, our tears wiped away. And we'll finally be doing, without any more fear or hesitation, what we were created to do from the beginning: worshiping God and glorifying him with every breath we take.

And notice how the New Jerusalem *comes down* to earth from heaven. God is going to make his home among mortals. That can surprise people who follow other religions. Frankly it can surprise some Christians. Because when you think of religion in general, most religion is about people trying to get from here to there. Most religion tries to go up. Whether it's through right beliefs or right actions, most religions' goal is to rise up out of this imperfect world to the next. But not in the Bible. In the Bible, we see that God's intention, the whole time, has been to come down and dwell with us. The whole bible from Genesis to Revelation is about a God who's trying to enter into the lives of human beings...who's trying to make his home among us, commune with us, unite with us. But we reject him, because we're trying to go up towards that big destination—whatever we think it is—on our own terms, trying to get to our own personal heavens.

This New Jerusalem at the end of the Bible...I know that some people—even some Christians—can find it hard to relate to. Sometimes it seems like "pie in the sky." Like, sure it's an awfully beautiful picture: no more tears, no more suffering and all that. But when you're in the middle of your tears, what has this beautiful city got to do with your life? Where is the New Jerusalem when in the news all you see is lying political leaders; greedy powerful and wealthy people clothed in false virtue; the routine death and violence; families disintegrating; the end of wrong and right? Where is the complete wholeness and health of the eternal city when you see with your own eyes so many children locking themselves in virtual worlds, unhappy with who they are? Where is the beautiful tree of life when you have cancer, or are mourning the loss of your spouse? For a lot of people, there is too much in the way, between us and such a beautiful city, for that

city to seem real. When you're working so hard to keep yourself above today's troubles; it can be hard to think about beautiful endings. Maybe that's why sometimes we look at the book of Revelation like it's a code-book—if we figure all the strange imagery out, we might have a better chance of getting ourselves from here to there. We make it into another hurdle we have to jump over to get to that better location.

And also, there's another side to all of this. We've seen what happens when people try to force this New Jerusalem into reality here in this broken world. In religion we've seen all the perfectionist groups who've tried every wacko idea you can think of...from communal living to abolishing marriage...in order to create a society where there are no more tears or suffering and where justice prevails. Worse yet, we've seen political movements which pervert the beautiful vision from today's second lesson. They say, we can have this now, with no divine intervention. We can do this. So let's abolish money and all private property. Let's have it now without acknowledging the power of sin and ignore how much the Bible tells us all of this beauty at the end of Revelation *costs*. The result: tyranny, mass murder, endless injustice. The point is: Something always seems to stand in the way of us getting from this world to that beautiful world. We've learned this time and again. And that's another reason that for a lot of people, the New Jerusalem in Revelation can seem so far off, so unrelated to our daily grind, so dreamlike, so empty of reality.

While it's beautiful and something to hope for, that vision also can bring it home to us: we are not there. We're still shedding tears. The war's still going on, the kids are still unhappy, and we still live in the shadow of death. And if that glorious vision of the future is going to mean anything to us in this wilderness, we're going to have to see it and touch it as a reality in our lives today.

And God knows that about you and me. God knows that we won't believe that the beautiful river flowing from his throne--we won't believe that healing river is for us...unless that same river is somehow flowing through our lives today. In other words, he knows you and I have got to be able to swim in that river *now* if we're going to be able to swim in it later. So where is this river? If we can't go up to it, could it be that God is already letting some of the water from that new world flow into our lives? Could it be that you and I have bathed in the water of that river already? Is this a promise that we've forgotten about? Has it become pie-in-the-sky? Or is that water from your baptism--from the crystal river flowing from the throne of God—that water of promise which has touched you just as you are—is it an unending flow which you return to and throw yourself into every day?

And what about that tree of life, and the fruit that grows on it for the healing of the nations? Is that just pie-in-the-sky? Is that just a nice picture of the future when you finally make it there, but not for you today? God knows we are burdened with cares, he knows that we have trouble even taking an interest in that future, much less trusting in it. God knows that we won't believe that the fruit from the tree of life in Revelation belongs to us, unless we can see that tree and eat that fruit today. So where have we seen this tree of life from the future? Where have we eaten what comes off of that tree in the New

Jerusalem? Could it be that God has already given this tree and its fruit to us just as we are? Could it be this tree is standing in front of us, and that in a few minutes you and I are going to eat the healing fruit that has come off of that tree? Could it be, that's where what other people might think of as pie-in-the-sky has become food for us to live by today?

As we stand here with empty hands in the wilderness, full of cares and sorrows, looking at the beautiful vision from the end of the Bible, we might easily miss what's closest to us. God's forgiveness and love working in people's lives is something we can all see. God giving his promise to a child in baptism is something we have all seen. Seven of our young people are saying "yes" to it—we can see that today. Even in worldly stuff as simple as bread and wine, we receive everlasting life, we become citizens today of the New Jerusalem. Even in pain, even in suffering and violence--even in death on a cross--you and I see something different: a new world coming. We see the victorious King.

Jesus has paid the highest price to make his beautiful city a reality. Was all that sacrifice just for a pie-in-the-sky? I hope you don't think so! Because as clearly as I see you all sitting right in front of me, with my own eyes I see the city of God.