

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 22, 2022

Revelation 21:10, 22--22:5

¹⁰And in the spirit [one of the angels] carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

^{22:1}Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

I have seen the Tree of Life.

No, not precisely the one John of Patmos envisioned.

**But the one that clings precipitously from the bluff side right
by the Kalaloch Beach campground in Olympic National
Park.**

**When we spent two nights at Kalaloch Lodge in March,
it was almost an afterthought at the end of a long but
wonderful day of climbing all over rocks to look at tide pool**

life. The tree had been recommended before we left Port Townsend but you can never do it all and everybody was pretty tired that afternoon.

But we piled out for one last time before we tucked into a nice campfire and card games back at our cabin at the lodge. It took a moment down at the beach to get our bearings but we pretty quickly noticed the Tree and a couple of other tourists scoping it out from beneath.

From afar, it's easy to scratch your head and wonder how on earth the thing could be alive. But from down below, it's pretty obvious but pretty impressive. The roots have twisted and wound their way to grasp a hold wherever they can and keep pulling nutrients and fresh water from the soil for generations now. They span either side of a stream that washes out the soil and keeps it from remaining directly beneath the heavy, and still growing, trunk.

It's quite something to behold.

And it's quite like what life is like for John and for Christians in the days in which the prophet wrote. Clinging to a fragile existence right on the edge. Defying the odds just to stay alive in a cold, harsh world that at best, doesn't seem to care if you live or if you die. And which at its worst, actively seeks to hasten your demise. But even in that harsh and hostile environment, beauty is still found and it is still created and nourished.

John wrote a lot uglier scenes in his recounting of the Revelation that God gave him. We often avoid reading and dwelling on those passages of the Scripture due to their strange, violent and scary imagery. But they reflect the reality that John and his community faced on the margins of society. Empire wanted to crush them. Life did not exist without the very real presence of death, always near.

If we look good and hard at it, the terrifying scenes of the Book of Revelation are even harder to accept because for most of Christian history, the faith has not been resistant to

— but rather co-opted by — empire. Thousands and thousands of lives have been sacrificed in Christ’s name, taken in vein. Much of the at-least-nominally Christian story is not that of holding on fiercely and bravely at the edge but rather pushing people and God’s creation to that edge and too often over it. Colonialism, a misguided belief in European cultural superiority and a false idol of earthly power time and again took the proper place of the Gospel in guiding the church.

And now we find ourselves in yet another time of life in a chaotic, unbalanced and unequal world. A vision like John’s is a stark contrast to what we have seen in the regular day-to-day of our lives. What goes on around us in this world is more like the preceding material in Revelation: destruction, violence, bloodshed and all sorts of fear-inducing trauma.

So what happens when there is this vision of something new, something inspirational and beautiful and illuminating in the middle of it all?

I can tell you what should not happen, first of all. The promise of a new heavenly city should not be taken as a license to stop caring for God's creation. That's a popular interpretation and a self-serving one. That we don't need to be concerned with environmental degradation and damage done to the Earth because God just gives us all a new one in the end anyway. Doesn't that just sound like a spoiled and heartless perspective? But it's real and it's common and it's harmful. And it doesn't serve us now or in the future. The words of the prophecy themselves proclaim that anyone who practices abomination and falsehood —and what an abomination and falsehood that is — will not enter this holy city through its forever-open gates.

Which leads to another consideration of what John's vision does not mean. It doesn't mean certain sinners, the

ones we don't like anyway, will be kept out. Those gates are always open. There's nothing to keep anyone out. The glory and honor of the nations, not just one nation or a select set, are gathered into the holy place. It's not important that certain people are left out — for who among is without sin? — but it is crucial that behaviors and practices that aren't in accordance with the reign of Heaven are dissolved. If the cleansing effects of daylight as we know it have not been enough to wipe these away, the disinfectant agent of the light of Christ that powers this city, this vision ... IT suffices to keep these damaging, sinful impulses from surfacing and unleashing the mayhem that they have for so long.

The new city is called by that ancient name Jerusalem, which does mean this is a vision that permits us to take the best of what is old and carry it into a better future. Before becoming part and parcel of Empire, the Christian movement focused itself most intensely on counter-cultural care for one another and beyond the bounds of its own community,

disregarding ethnic and class divides ... in essence, reflecting and magnifying the light of Christ. And to be clear, these emphases have never been entirely lost but have been habitually overshadowed.

Making other things the main thing has steered the church wrong for too long, but this now-ancient vision of the future still provides a guiding light. And that is, and always has been Christ.

Continued:

We can go back to the future that is God's future, and in the midst of dark and unsettling circumstances we have played a role in creating, we can recapture anew a position as the people of God who stand in that light, that like the tree that John saw it and the tree that I saw on the bluff, span opposing sides and promote healing.

That's something that can draw curiosity and marvel.

That is something to see.

Amen.