

The 6th Sunday of Easter (C)
May 26, 2019
Text: Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

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For good or ill, the vision we have of how the world could be, or should be, drives how we live in the world. Contrast, for example, Dylan Roof, with his repugnant vision of white supremacy and sparking a race war by shooting black parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, with Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a world in which people are no longer judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Both of them followed where their vision led them, Martin Luther King Jr. to a life of heroic and sacrificial love, and Dylan Roof to a life marked by cowardice and murder. The vision that moves and motivates us is tremendously important.

Our second reading this morning, from the book of Revelation, is literally a “vision.” John the Elder describes what he saw as an angel carried him, in the spirit, to a great, high mountain. This vision is how John pictures the way the world should be—and the way it will be, transformed and made whole by God. It’s important to not read it as some kind of soft reassurance that everything will be better someday. Instead, the book of Revelation is a sustained, visionary protest against the world as it is. According to John, the world as it is now is unacceptable. The violence, the pain, the arrogance and greed—it is unacceptable, and it is headed for the trash can of history. God will not simply allow the world to be forever dominated by the haters and the takers, because God has something different in mind. God has something beautiful in mind. John pictures God’s victory as a city—the city of Jerusalem—remade by God’s values. And as John’s vision begins to inform our vision for the world, we become agents of that genuinely beautiful future God is calling the world to become. We begin to see how our city can become God’s city.

There’s an almost hallucinogenic quality to John’s vision—God’s people live in a new city of Jerusalem that is coming down out of heaven from God. As we decode the imagery of John’s vision, perhaps we can begin to sense the power of what John wants us to see and feel about the world as God intends for it to be. As I reflect on it, there are five elements of the vision that stand out to me as particularly powerful. In this new city, 1) there is no temple, 2) there is no sun or moon, 3) the gates of the city will never shut, 4) the tree of life grows there, and 5) there is no night at all.

The very first thing John notices is that in the city, this new Jerusalem, there is no temple, which is a big deal. The first thing anyone approaching the ancient city of Jerusalem would have seen was the temple at the highest point of the city, gleaming with gold and shining in the sunlight. It was a symbol of God’s presence among God’s people. But in the new Jerusalem, there is no need for a temple to stand in for God’s presence because now God is fully there. No institution is needed to mediate between God and humanity. And even more than that, the old temple was all about divisions—the priests were closest to God, then men, then women, and finally Gentiles (the foreigners). And those kinds of divisions have continued to have currency in the church, with structures that suggest some people are closer to God, and others not so much. But when our city becomes God’s city, all those old distinctions about who is closer to God and

who is not so close—all those distinctions are gone as well. Imagine if the human family was able to live like that! And what happens when God’s people are driven by that kind of vision?

And then John observes that there is no sun or moon—the city doesn’t need them! There is no need for external light, because the glory of God illumines everything, and Christ, who is the Lamb of God, who is the Light of the world, Christ is the One who makes us see each other as each one truly is—beloved child of God; forgiven and precious in God’s sight; one in whom God dwells. I wonder what would happen if we were consistently able to see each other in that light, if our city became God’s city. I don’t doubt that it would bring incredible change to how we interact, how we speak to each other and treat each other.

Next John says that the gates of the city will never be shut. Earlier in the chapter, John said there would be 12 gates, 3 on each side of the city—beautiful gates made of precious stones. The gates aren’t for controlling access, they’re for letting everyone in. And they’ll never be closed because there are no enemies. There is nothing to fear. Because everyone is a child of God, because we see everyone in the light of God’s love, when our city becomes God’s city, enemies are a thing of the past. Clearly, we’re not there yet, but what if Christians were known for loving their enemies and praying for them?

Then, the water of life flows through the city, and the tree of life grows on both banks—beautiful and lush and green. Those trees of life give fresh fruit every season, so that there is never a time when there isn’t enough food for everyone. And the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations—every branch of the wounded human family is restored and made whole. Here’s where John’s vision seems to be so far out ahead of us—but what if? What if everyone had enough to eat? And what if there was healing for the wounds and sorrows of the whole human family? When God’s city becomes our city, we will know in our bones that Jesus’ way of compassion and forgiveness really does hold healing for us and for all our relationships.

And finally, there is no more night. There is no more darkness of any sort—no more ignorance, no more indifference, no more bigotry or hate, no more judgment or exclusion. All of the things that grow out of the darkness of the human heart are gone, and if that’s not a dream worth chasing, I don’t know what is. That kind of vision has power to energize God’s people to push through the hard times and the frustrating times, the push against the darkness that is so strong now, knowing that the time for it to dominate and diminish the human family is limited. There is a new day coming.

There’s nothing passive about this kind of hope, and it isn’t just a crazy dream. Scripture knows that imagining and yearning for what is beautiful is the first step. This vision leaves no room for cynicism or resigning ourselves to the way things are. Instead, this vision gives energy to resist everything that makes this world so much less than what God desires, to resist the meanness and cruelty, the indifference, the greed, the suspicion and hate. This vision invites us to reach for this alternative way of seeing the world—seeing our world as ready to give birth to freedom and dignity, justice and reconciliation—seeing that God can transform our city to become God’s city. God will never give up on this world, and as John’s vision grabs our imaginations and informs what we see as possible, we won’t give up either. Thanks be to God. Amen.