

Revelation 21:1-22:6
Sixth Sunday of Easter (C)
9 May 2010

“The New Jerusalem”

I. Not long ago someone made the remark that it seems like churches don't talk very much about heaven anymore. At first, I thought they had it wrong. I know we talk regularly about our hope of being with the Lord forever. I also know we talk a lot about how we get there through faith in Christ. But, as far as talking about the new heaven and earth itself, I suppose we don't hear as much as we could.

I wonder why that might be? In some circles, I suppose it could be that heaven is seen as one of those things modern minds find difficult to accept. For others it might be that if you take heaven too seriously, you might just have to take hell seriously, too. But, even for those of us who accept the reality of both hell and heaven, I think there might still be some reluctance to spend too much time talking about it for fear it could become a distraction. If we spend a lot of time longing for what is to come, perhaps we'll pay less attention to what the Lord has for us to do right now. Maybe, we'll fall into the same kind of spiritual and physical lackadaisicalness we hear about in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, where some of the people there literally sat around doing nothing while they waited for the Lord to return (2 Thess. 3:6ff).

I suppose that kind of foolishness can happen, but, on the other hand, why does the book of Revelation end as it does, with a grand vision of the new heaven and earth, if it's not profitable for us to spend time dwelling on it? Isn't it because our Lord knows that the promise and joy of heaven is a good part of what helps us keep focused in life, what helps us to keep going, seeking to serve him in His kingdom, especially when that service gets rough? Isn't it a bit like it is for kids who spend the afternoon cleaning their room, knowing there will be a bowl of ice cream waiting for them on the

kitchen table? Even though life forever with the Lord is a gift of God's love and mercy in Christ, rather than some reward earned by our own hard work, it's still the goal to which we're looking forward.

While Revelation 21 and 22 are part of a vision, with many details which are symbolic, they do give us a picture of that hope which can inspire and encourage us in our life in the Lord. Listen once again to what we heard last Sunday: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will live with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And He who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new!’ Also He said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true”* (21:1-5).

The Bible never gives us the impression God will totally destroy this earth and create a new heaven and earth out of nothing, as He did in the beginning. But we do know that all the “old” things will completely give way to the “new.” What God has begun in our Baptism by making us new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14) will be brought to completion. All the things that have made God's good creation so difficult will be gone. Pain, tears, sadness, grief, death—gone, forever. The perfect bliss of heaven is described in those negative terms, partly because we can't conceive of perfection in positive terms due to the limitations of our experience in this fallen world, and partly because we can appreciate the thought of being relieved of all those distresses.

But, did you also notice that something else is missing in the new heaven and earth? The sea. Not that there necessarily won't be any

more water. But the sea, especially for the Hebrews, was something fearful that separated them from their brothers and sisters dispersed all over the Mediterranean and beyond after the Babylonian Captivity; and later for John, something that helped keep him in exile on the island of Patmos where he was given this vision. In the picture of the vanished sea John sees the dawning of a day when there will be no more separations. All those who are in Christ—loved ones, friends, brothers and sisters in the faith—all those who have been separated from us by distance or time, will be brought together, in a massive joyful family reunion with those who trust in Jesus that will go on for eternity.

That reunion will be possible because our separation from heaven will also be over. The sin that has kept us from seeing God face to face will “flee way” (KJV) as John writes, will pass away with all the rest of the “old order of things” (NIV). In the “new heaven and earth,” there will be no barrier between heaven and earth as there is now. God will dwell in our midst and we in His. The communion we celebrate with Him now under the veil of bread and wine will be made complete, and we’ll be able to join together with Him and His people in the marriage feast of the Lamb that will go on forever.

“Then came one of the angels . . . and spoke to me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit, to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. . . And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as

glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysolite, the eleventh jacinth, and twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. . . . And its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. . . . Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of Life" (21:9-27).

I remember the first time I saw the Emerald City in the Wizard of Oz, looking over the field of poppies with Dorothy and her friends at the soaring towers of glimmering green. Imagine how our breath will be taken away at the beauty of the New Jerusalem: a city of jewels, 2200 kilometers wide and long and high!

Although obviously a vision, what John is shown is a magnificent cube. It's the same shape as was the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple. A wonderful picture of perfect, complete life in the presence of the Blessed Trinity, who is not three gods, one along side one another, 1+1+1; but One God in three Persons 1x1x1—the God who fills everything in every way, the God in whom we move, live and have our being. In this vision, like the Holy of Holies, the whole City of God is filled and illumined with His glory. Although the sun and moon may very well continue to give us light, we won't need their light. God and the Lamb will be our light, a light that will never again be dimmed, not by sin or shame, not by night or storm.

Unlike Jerusalem of old that light won't be restricted to a Temple. In the vision, the jeweled foundations of the city, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, happen to be the same twelve stones which once adorned the high priest's breastplate, which he wore when he

entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Because the Lamb has become our High Priest and, at the same time, the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins, the final and complete atonement; we will all have complete access to God's throne. Every one of us will be privileged to serve in His presence, and to bask in the warmth of His glory, even as the twelve apostles walked and ministered with Him.

Twelves and twelve-times-twelves run through the description of the City. A life rooted in the fullness of life with God and the Lamb – a life the Lord has always wanted His people to have. The life the tribes and apostles experienced in part, we will be able to experience in full, with the gates to God's presence always open, with the light of His love always shining from His face upon ours.

“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 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. . . . And they will reign forever and ever” (22:1-6).

Do you ever spend time looking at those brochures about Hawaii or Tahiti and daydream about what it would be like to live in Paradise for a couple of weeks? In the Garden paradise was lost, but because of the Lamb who was slain, Paradise Earth will be regained forever. As John is shown in the vision, the cherubim and flaming sword that were placed to block the way to the Tree of Life will be removed. As the Lord always intended it to be, we will be able to eat of its healing fruit and live with Him forever. The curse which our first parents brought on them and us, who continue to nibble on forbidden fruit, will be gone. What once became ashes and dust will be raised to life which will never perish again. What has been pained from childbirth to death will be freed to live without pain or

suffering or loss or oppression or conflict. Thorns will no longer infest the ground, so that what was gained by the sweat of the brow will be done with songs of joy.

III. Worth waiting for? You bet! But, you know what? God is so good that He has already given us a little bit of that heaven right here in this old earth of ours. Right here on this altar God comes to make His dwelling with us. The Lamb who sits on the right hand of the throne of His Father, chooses to come to us under bread and wine with His glorified body and blood. He comes to wipe away our tears of mourning and pain and shame and to assure us, “I am making everything new.”

God’s work of renewal doesn’t wait until the Last Day when He will bring down the New Jerusalem from heaven. He’s working right now to renew and restore us with His Word and Spirit. He’s here to work His love through His Good News of forgiveness and peace in Christ so that more disciples can be made who will be able to join us around the throne of God and of the Lamb. So, fellow pilgrims, as we continue on our way, in our service to God and to the world, let’s look forward to our heavenly home, and take comfort in God’s promises; for as He Himself has said, “*Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.*”

+ + +

Preached by
Pastor Mark Hartburg
at
Historic St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
137 Queen St. S., Kitchener, Ontario
519-745-4891

Listen to the messages at www.historicstpauls.ca

Together Lifting High the Cross of Jesus
for 175 years