

**Holy City**  
**Revelation 21:10-22:5**  
**Rev. Catherine Robinson preaching**  
**May 22, 2022—St. Andrew Presbyterian**

When I was in seminary  
I went to lunch one day  
with my mother's cousin, June,  
who lived in Austin.  
June was an exuberant and joyful woman  
who was a very faithful member  
in a Christian denomination  
that..  
well, let's just say  
that they read the Bible differently  
from the way we do  
in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

After initial pleasantries,  
Cousin June and I began  
to remember relatives  
who were long gone.  
And that topic inspired Cousin June  
to wax eloquent on  
how much she was looking forward  
to going to heaven.  
Her excitement seemed kind of strange to me  
because *I* was rather enjoying  
my time here on earth.  
But June was super excited about it.  
In fact, she could barely attend  
to her Mexican food,  
she was so excited about going to heaven.  
(Who ignores Mexican food  
for heaven?  
I mean, aren't they basically the same?)  
In her excitement,  
June began to describe in great detail  
what heaven was going to be like.  
And her description  
was right out of this passage  
that we've just read from the book of Revelation.  
She told me about every single jewel  
that was going to be  
in the foundation of the wall.  
And of course, those gates that are pearls,  
from which we get the expression  
"pearly gates."

She closed her eyes,  
 trying to imagine gold  
 that was as clear as glass.

By this point,  
 I think I had just about abandoned  
*my* Mexican food!  
 I don't think my twenty-something self  
 was very good at responding to her.

This sermon isn't exactly  
 a *response* to Cousin June,  
 because she would disagree  
 with me so profoundly  
 that I'm not sure we would be able  
 to have a conversation.

But perhaps,  
 this sermon is a response to her perspective.  
 Let's look again at the text  
 and see what we hear in it today.

In this vision,  
 the angel shows John of Patmos the holy city of Jerusalem  
*coming down*  
 from heaven.  
 Notice the movement.  
 Heaven is coming  
*down to earth.*

Roger talked about this last week.  
 In the book of Revelation,  
 God doesn't take humans to heaven;  
 God brings heaven to humans.

And furthermore,  
 this is not just about pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by.  
 There is a not-yet aspect  
 to the book of Revelation.  
 The vision is not fully realized.

But in chapter 11 of the book of Revelation we hear that  
 "The kingdom of the world  
*has become*  
 the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah."  
 The invitation  
 is to enter into God's vision  
 for the world *even now*,  
 and to live into that vision.

Recently, I heard Dr. Cornel West,  
 the well-known theologian, social critic, and public intellectual,  
 say that his mother used to tell him,  
 "Cornel, the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.  
 And wherever you go,

you better leave  
     a little bit of heaven behind you."  
 Put a peg in that  
     and hold it in your heart and mind  
         as we continue.  
 The Kingdom of Heaven is within you,  
     and wherever you go,  
 you better leave  
     a little bit of heaven behind you.

Back to John's vision  
     of heaven-on-earth.  
 I want to invite you to do something.  
 Put on your imaginary walking shoes.  
 Come along with me,  
     and let's tour this city together  
     and see what we find.

The first thing we notice  
     is that the city *does indeed* sparkle  
     with amazing beauty and color.  
         Cousin June absolutely got that right!  
 But let's not get too distracted by all of that.  
     There's so much more!  
 Keep walking. Keep walking.  
 Have you noticed?—  
     there's no temple  
         in this heaven-on-earth-city!  
         God and the Lamb *are* the temple.  
         In this city  
             there is holiness everywhere  
                 you look.  
             Look at that person over there—holiness.  
             Look at that rock—holiness!  
             Look at that building—holiness!  
                 Everywhere you look—  
                     holiness!  
                 Hmmm...  
                     what a concept!

Okay.  
 Let's not dawdle.  
     If you look all around you,  
         you'll see a wall around this city.  
         All ancient cities had walls.  
             But look over there at the gates!  
             They're open!  
             The gates of this city  
                 are *never shut*.

Friends, we are in  
 a very welcoming city right now.  
 There are no walls  
 to keep out foreigners  
 here in heaven-on-earth.  
 We have no insiders and outsiders.  
 Everyone is welcome.  
 Now isn't that amazing?

Now let's move over here...

what do we parched New Mexicans find?  
 The river of the water of life,  
 bright as crystal,  
 flowing through the middle of the city.  
 Take those imaginary walking shoes off  
 if you want.

Dip your toes in.  
 For our droughted,  
 wind-blown,  
 fire-infested state  
 this is quite a vision.  
 Let's just sit here for a moment  
 with our feet in the cool water.  
 Close your eyes, if you want,  
 and picture that water flowing  
 from God  
 all over northern New Mexico.  
 Picture that water  
 flowing all over our state...  
 wherever the fires burn.

What a vision.  
 What a prayer...

And now, with your feet still in the water,  
 look over there at that tree.

That is the tree of life.  
 It has twelve kinds of fruit  
 to keep people fed all the time.  
 No more hungry people.  
 Taste the fruit yourself if you want to.  
 Mmmm...juicy and sweet!

And while you're there  
 pluck a leaf off that tree—  
 leaves for the healing of the nations, these are.  
 Those leaves that you're holding  
 have medicinal qualities.  
 Smell your leaf.  
 What does healing smell like to you?  
 That's what your leaf smells like.

Are you wounded anywhere?

Is your heart hurting?

Is your soul sick  
with fear,  
with rage,  
with grief.

These leaves are for you.

Plaster these healing leaves  
on the place that hurts.

But these leaves

are not just for you.

These leaves are

for the African American community  
in Buffalo and elsewhere,  
for our whole damaged nation  
that lives with the ravages  
of gun violence and white supremacy,  
for the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church  
for the whole Taiwanese American Community,  
for the terrifying violence  
that China threatens to Taiwan.

These leaves are

for the people of Ukraine,  
for the people of Palestine,  
the people of Iraq  
and Afganistan  
and Yemen  
and Ethiopia.

These leaves are

for people who walk the streets of our own city  
without shelter,  
without food,  
without medical care;  
who come here seeking asylum

Who else?

Who else in our world needs healing?

Picture them now

in this prayer imagining.

Offer them leaves from the tree.

Leaves for the healing of the nations.

That's the end of our tour.

You may return to Albuquerque now.

Do you remember this charge from Cornel West's mama?

The Kingdom of Heaven is within us,  
and wherever we go,  
we better leave

a little bit of heaven behind us.  
 The Kingdom of Heaven  
 has come down to earth in Jesus  
 has pitched its tent in the world  
 among us...  
*among us!!!*  
 Part of heaven-on-earth!  
 Right here!...  
 if we only open our eyes,  
 and our ears,  
 and our hearts and our minds  
 and notice!

God has moved into our lives,  
 has healed our wounded hearts,  
 has bound us into community,  
 has called us into service,  
 has given us beauty and grace beyond measure.

Part of heaven-on-earth—here!  
 Hold that in your heart.  
 Hold it fast.

And then follow the Light of Christ  
 into the world this morning.  
 Carry the memory of  
 our tour of the holy city  
 with you.

And watch your siblings in Christ  
 as they go from this place.

Watch yourself!

Look carefully now!...

because there will be little bits of heaven  
 left behind

with each  
 step

that

we

take.

Thanks be to God.  
 Amen.