

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.