

“Beautiful City of God”

Imagine, if you will, the Temple Mount of Jesus’ time. The platform of the Temple was about 36 acres. That is just a little less than three times the size of our two cemeteries. The Temple Mount was not small. But this area was not an open space nor was it open to everyone. Indeed, the Temple platform was divided into areas with restrictions. About a third of the area of the platform was called the Court of the Gentiles. Anyone could enter this area. But then there was a screen or fence that prevented Gentiles from getting closer to the Temple and its various entrances.

There were three closer courts for Jews. One was the Court of the Women. It was a large outer court that any Jew could enter. Closer in was the Court of Israel. This was for Jewish men only. Next was the Court of the Priests. Then there was the actual Temple which only designated priests could enter. Finally, there was the Holy of Holies, the area deepest inside the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was enclosed by a large curtain from floor to ceiling. A priest was to enter this area alone. As you can see access to the Temple was very restricted. Hold on to this image.

In today’s reading from The Revelation to John the narrator tells us that he was carried up in the spirit by an angel to a high mountain. This is so he could witness the lowering of the New Jerusalem from heaven. The New Jerusalem was not a rebuilt city, but a perfected version of God’s Holy City. It was beautiful in ways that the real city was not. There were no derelict buildings, no trash, no vermin, and nothing smelly, crooked or unsavory. The New Jerusalem was the paradigm of the Shining City on a Hill.

Not only was the city free of imperfections, but it was enhanced in other ways. An angel shows John the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God down the main street of Jerusalem. This reminds us of the rivers that flowed out of Eden that watered and nourished the garden and all of creation. The river flows from the throne of God who is the source of all life. On either side of the river are trees, also like in the Garden of Eden, only these trees will bear twelve kinds of fruit each in its season. The leaves of the trees will heal the nations that are all people of the world.

Another change to the city is that the gates are never closed. The gates of the city were there to protect those living in Jerusalem from invading armies and bandits. In the New Jerusalem they will not be closed because they do not need to be closed. All people will be welcome and none will do anything evil inside its walls. The holiness of the city prevents it.

Perhaps the most startling change in the city is that there will be no Temple. The Temple was the home of God. It was God who lived in the Holy of Holies. It was not just a special place it was the actual home of God on earth. But in the New Jerusalem there will not be a Temple in which God will reside,

because God's throne is the center of the city. You will remember that in the passage from last week John wrote:

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them”

God no longer needs a private residence to which only a few have access. God now presides in the open among all people. God is truly with us. What is even more remarkable is that all people will be able to see the face of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, it was considered a sentence of death to see the face of God. Even Moses was not allowed to see God's face. But now all will be able to gaze upon the creator of all things in wonder, love and praise.

Additionally, God is not just a mighty king sitting on a throne in the midst of it all. Like a loving parent who comforts a child; when we are sad, in pain, or hurting God will kneel down at our side and wipe away our tears and comfort us so that we may have the full rich life that God has promised from the beginning.

John does not say who those people are in this New Jerusalem except that they are people who worship God and do no wrong thing. Since we all make mistakes and commit sins, I believe it is us who, are called to that New Jerusalem. And that New Jerusalem is not in some far off future, but is here and now. For the New Jerusalem is in you. We are washed in the blood of the Lamb and freed from our sins. The New Jerusalem is in each of the holy children of God. And the water that flows from the center of the New Jerusalem is the love that flows from each of us into the world, like the living water that Jesus spoke about to the Samaritan woman.

John may have been swept up by an angel like Ezekiel in order to witness something unimaginably new. It may have seemed as unreal to him as it may seem to us today. But I do not doubt that one day we will be gathered with God and all the saints, in a New Jerusalem that is our healed hearts. Then as the hymn says we will be “gathered at the river, the beautiful the beautiful river, gathered with the saints at the river that flows from the throne of God, that flows from the throne of God.”