

The Holy City
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 & John 14:23-29
Amy Cerniglia

Peace Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Easter
26 May 2019

Several years ago, a rabbi invited me to lead music for her rural Mississippi congregation. Afterward, she gave me a book of liturgy to remember the experience, and you can see its cover on the screen. The first page bears a Hebrew inscription which translates, "The gates of repentance are always open." This image long lingered with me, and apparently it also stuck with John, who chooses the image of open gates to describe the kingdom of God.

Through John's book of Revelation, God chose to reveal the future kingdom through the vision of a prisoner. We know that John's imagined world is biologically impossible because there is no sunlight, yet trees are growing. There is no sun, yet there is also no night. Now, in the previous chapter of Revelation, John describes the idolatry and oppression the earthly kings, which gives us little reason to hope for their repentance. Yet in Revelation 21, John describes them present in God's kingdom. Certainly, he must have been "carried away in the Spirit" to dream up this scenario, because - sorry, John - it does not sound very realistic.

A person oppressed by powerful enemies would have every reason to fantasize about a new world where the bad guys are defeated. Or, if an old-fashioned smiting seems too harsh...maybe we just want our enemies somewhere else. Far away, just as John's enemies exiled him to the island of Patmos, where he wrote this book.

But John promises that no evil can enter again. So we know that, somehow, the earthly kings are present, but their wicked actions have not entered with them. The oppressors have been integrated and reconciled in such a way that even at night, no one is unsafe. This image speaks to me particularly as a woman, particularly as a young woman.

Hear the word of the Lord:

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

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 is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. 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 there will be no more night; they need no light or lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Now I must admit that I empathize more with the prophet Jonah than with John. While John waves in the kings of Babylon - *come on in, glad you made it!* - I might be staring warily with Jonah from a safe distance, much like the day he watched with skepticism as the Ninevites receive God's grace. And this brings us to the real problem of Revelation: how do we get *that* from *this*? In other words, how do we reconcile an unrealistic future with the need for realistic action today? I don't think any of you would say it's enough to sit back waiting for God to fix the world. My experience of people at Peace has been one of active involvement, not passivity and rose-colored glasses.

Shelly Rambo, a professor at Boston University, says that our theology must respond to the suffering we see in the headlines and in troubled faces around us. And there is never a shortage of material, is there. I'm sure the disciples of Jesus would have agreed at this point in their story. If God's presence in the holy city is an eternal light, we can imagine they experienced the very opposite after witnessing his violent death. While Revelation references the beautiful tree of life, the disciples saw their friend tortured on a tree of death. Any of us would be traumatized and paralyzed by such an experience. How could the disciples see any room for hope and redemption in the aftermath? But Jesus, preparing to leave the disciples a second time by ascending into heaven, fills his friends with assurance. Hear the word of the Lord:

John 14:23-29

Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father

is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

When I drove to the Mississippi Delta to play for the synagogue, I spent hours on a stretch of two-line highway through miles of flat, brown dirt. About two hours in, after you pass Yazoo, the scenery really gets exciting. Instead of soil, you get rows and rows of tall cornfields.

The Delta is swampy, it's barren, whole towns are caving in because of poor construction on weak clay. Everyone in Jackson has dark and scary stories about the Delta. I wasn't thrilled about driving up there alone and, as you might expect, my wife was even less excited! I almost always had one hand on my phone, connecting me to a friend or family member, which helped me breathe a little more easily until I reached the temple.

By offering breath to unsettled spirits, Jesus offers a connectedness the world can never threaten. In the Old Testament, God's spirit offers the all-encompassing presence of a temple when there is no temple. We see this demonstrated in the New Testament vision of God's presence throughout the holy city. Every verse linking breath to God describes the weak empowered, the dead risen, the driest bones enlivened, and some action once thought impossible is achieved.

When speaking of his spirit, Jesus reminds the disciples that he brings peace. This contrasts with the peace of the world, where dominance, oppression, and gates falsely promise safety in separation from each other.

Peace is not only an individual and internal sense of calm. It is also communal. There is so much anxiety that turns neighbor against neighbor, but true peace is practiced in community. Jesus offers us a peace that is not troubled by whether we share our table with lifelong Presbyterians or visitors. This peace is not unsettled by friends of other nationalities or faiths. This peace constructs a bridge to the person furthest away from where I saw myself going. There are people I could never have envisioned myself in fellowship with, but for the Spirit opening my eyes. If the kingdom of God is an open gate, God's Spirit is the bridge we walk to get there.

So Jesus doesn't call us to passively wait for peace. Like his followers, we actively work toward building bridges to peace in many ways, through discipleship, mission and reconciliation.

This brings us back to John's dream, the natural end of welcoming others to abide with us. In our tables, in our churches, and in our lives. In full completion of the commandment to love God and neighbor, there is no more separation from either, and we realize there was never any need for segregation, incarceration, or expulsion.

In case you've never been lucky enough to visit the Mississippi Delta, I will describe it to you. Even in 2017, I saw restaurants with signs implying, as legally as they can, that only white patrons are welcome. The rabbi is one of the only female faith leaders within hundreds of miles. Train tracks separate mansions built on inherited wealth from trailers steeped in generational poverty. What you see is so discouraging, the city and its kings almost seem irredeemable.

But when I led music at the temple, people of all colors were worshipping together. Under the leadership of two women, the rabbi and myself. Now, remember the oldest division in our Scriptures. Jewish communities have argued for years over whether Gentiles like me should be allowed to serve as musicians in worship. There were so many reasons why our peaceful community should have been laughable. If I said, a lesbian Gentile walked into a synagogue, it would sound like the beginning of a joke. But we weren't afraid of each other. We were all singing together, taking our breaths as a unified whole. In that moment, even the Delta seemed capable of redemption.

We know John's prophesied kingdom is the product of a wild imagination, which makes no sense through the lens of our historical knowledge or our daily experiences. Thank goodness we can see beyond ourselves. In the midst of our broken world, we can work toward the impossible one. We can advocate, with the Spirit's help, to open the gates, inch by inch. And I hope you will join me singing the whole way home.