

The Kingdom of God is a City
Revelation 21:22-21:5

May 22, 2022, Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ 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 ² 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. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

For us modern readers, the Book of Revelation holds a lot of shocks and surprises. A lion who is a lamb. Monsters and beasts coming out for the sea. A war between a woman and a dragon. Horns and eyes and heavenly creatures, and imagery we don't often associate with holy scripture. But maybe most surprising of all in this book aren't the beast or eyes or any of the fantastic imagery John of Patmos gives us to share his vision of goodness defeating evil, of Christ overcoming the powers of this world

What is most surprising to us reading this in reading it in the 21st Century is that **the Kingdom of God is a city.**

When we think about our final resting place, a city is not what most of us imagine. We imagine a floating, ethereal space. Or a house where we are with only our closest friends and family. Or maybe a pastoral farmland all on our own, with rolling hills and no one around to bother us. And maybe those scenes really connect with you. But that's not what we get in scripture.

At the very end of Revelation, we are told that the eternal Kingdom Christ came to proclaim and save and welcome us into is actually a city. A city full of diverse people. A city where every nation, every language, every tribe comes together to live. A city where the gates are always open because war and violence and bloodshed is over. A city without disease or death. A city where God is fully present and wipes away all of our tears. A city that is green – there's lush vegetation,

abundance of trees and fruits, and the cleanest, clearest river you have ever seen. A city that is different than any we've ever been in before. But it is a city, bustling, busy, and full of people.

Brian Blount, the President of Union Presbyterian Seminary, has a fantastic commentary on the Book of Revelation. And in that book, he writes about this final city of God, saying:

“John’s view of the future is that the believing community will find its ultimate meaning and life in urban rapport [in an urban setting, not a countryside]. For many contemporary Christians, this part of the vision is as scary as the segments that deal with dragons and plagues. Cities are inclusive, teeming, often dangerous and riotous places, where resources can be stretched to the breaking point and success—indeed, even survival—comes only when we work together, negotiate strenuously, and compromise sincerely.”
(p.378)

If the Kingdom of God is a city, there are some new challenges in it. First, it means that we will be living with people who are not exactly like us. Who come from different cultures and lands and languages. But also, have maybe even different views of theology and politics, tastes in art and culture. People with different habits than ours. And that we in God’s everlasting kingdom, will have to find a way to live peacefully together. That we will have to work to build real community. We can’t just say, “well this group of people I’ve never liked, but I won’t have to deal with them again.” No, we will. We will have to learn more than just how to tolerate or not kill each other. We will have to learn how to truly enjoy, welcome, and love one another.

The second challenge is that we will have to learn how to be good citizens of this city. If the Kingdom of God is a city, and also this place of perfect love and light and shalom, it means that we must be a part of it. And so, it means that we must be transformed into people who share in joy and peace, love, and forgiveness, sharing and blessing. To live into God’s kingdom is not just to live in right relationship with God. But to live in right relationship with our neighbors – all of our neighbors. And so, it means all of us still have lots of work to do in how we hold grudges, share gossip, deal with conflict, share our resources, and deal with differences. The only way this city of God will work not just to have the trees and the river, and the sky transformed. But it is to have all of us transformed too. We have work to do.

But with these challenges is great hope. First, our hope is that this kingdom will include something we all seek and need – community and love. That those two things will be at the center of it all. It also means that those we love and have lost we will see again in that city. That our eternal kingdom is not private but shared. We will see God face to face. But we will also see loved ones we long to hold and touch, hear their voices, and see their faces. And finally, it means that the things we love about cities – learning new ways, discovering new art, sharing in literature and poetry and music, feasting on wondrous meals, celebrating at tables with friends, walking and diving deep into conversation – all of those will be here.

To me, that is very exciting. That the Kingdom of God is not this boring place we've been told. But a place full of art, gardens, beauty, and most of all community and love.

Finally, what does this mean for us as Christians today?

It means that one of our callings here and now is not to flee the city, but to engage and care more deeply for it. To meet new neighbors. To cross divisions and barriers. To serve neighbors in need, and welcome strangers into our lives. And that just engaging with music and art and food and culture, and community is a holy thing, because it prepares us to live into that holy city.