

Sermon Title: Not Temples But Vessels
Text: Revelation 21:22-22:5; John 14:23-29

May 13, 2007
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
© The Rev. Dr. Charles Valenti-Hein

“Are you saved?” If there was a single question that shaped my youngest faith journey, at least the part I was conscious of, beginning, I suppose, as a 7th or 8th grader, and dogging me through college, it was this question: “Are you saved?” And it is not entirely coincidental that one of the ways that question was asked, repeatedly, during those years was where I thought I would find myself if the rapture were to happen tomorrow? Would I be the one swept up in God’s arms, or one left behind to endure the wrath? It is, I suppose, a tribute to how indelibly marked my mind was that I still remember the song they taught us to sing. I think I even remember the chords...”Two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one’s left standing still. I wish we’d all been ready...”

You see, the heaven that was imagined by my well intentioned mentors was an exclusive place, reserved for those who had “given their lives” to Jesus, and then managed to avoid the dangers and pitfalls of life, or at least learned how to earnestly repent when they’d stumbled. Heaven was, in that construction, a place filled with people who for the most part looked and acted and thought like *me*.

I have found myself thinking a great deal about this God who was pressed upon me during those formative years these past weeks, as I found myself drawn to the readings from Revelation that move to the center of our lectionary through this season of Eastertide. I’ve been struck, maybe because my thoughts have run parallel to the announcement that the Broadway musical *Wicked* will be playing in Appleton in a couple of years, at how much those two stories were overlapped and interwoven...how much my Christian journey was fused to Frank Baum’s characters, trying desperately to “follow the yellow brick road” to the Emerald City, where they would be able to meet the Wizard, who would give them all exactly what they needed, and Dorothy, especially, could go home.

You remember the scene as Dorothy, and the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the cowardly lion finally come in to the city? How they are primped, and pampered, shined and re-stuffed? It was this, I realized as I thought about it, that served as my mental image of the verses we read from John’s vision this morning: “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.” But it looks just like Oz! We skipped a bunch of verses then, but if we had read them, with good background music, it would have created just that image of the Emerald City in our mind: the city had the radiance of a rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. Pure as gold, clear as glass and shimmering with precious stones. Add a few cheerful munchkins and the scene would be complete....somewhere over the rainbow! Paradise, restored!

But it was the omission of that description of the bejeweled city that turned my mind to something I had not really paid attention to in the text before. It’s right where we picked up the reading again: in this glorious city, the *New Jerusalem*, there is one thing conspicuously missing. You don’t have to think too hard to realize that for those to whom John first addressed his vision, Jerusalem without a temple would make about as much sense as Washington DC

without the Capitol building or the White House, or Rome without the Vatican. The city and the place would have been so interwoven that there would have been no reason for the city *except* that it was the place in which the Temple of the Lord was located, with its courts and partitions, and most crucially, its Holy of Holies, in which the presence of God dwelt. It is an odd Jerusalem indeed that has *no temple*.

It follows the enmeshed story, actually. After all, when Dorothy and the cohort finally get to see the Wizard we learn that he's not really a wizard at all. Just a misplaced circus has been who has no real magic after all. And I fear that for most of us, John's revelation falls into a similar pot. It's an interesting story, but nothing there at the end of the day. But in Revelation, I think there is something very different at stake. Try to get the strangeness of this image into your mind: there at the center of the city of God but only the presence of God and the Lamb. It is a place constantly illumined by the love of God, a place of welcome, and openness, where all the nations of the world find their place.

Nothing could have been more different from the temple that, if we can surmise correctly the date of Revelation, had been destroyed a generation earlier by the Romans who had had enough of the squabbles and rebellions of Palestine. John McFadden, during our Lenten bible study, did a wonderful job of explaining how that temple was a place of ever narrowing exclusion, working through successive courts, leaving behind non-Jews, then women, then those who were not priests, until it was only the one High Priest who could enter into the small dark chamber of the Holy of Holies, there only to seek God's forgiveness one day a year.

In Revelation this temple is turned inside out...all come to the light and find their place. Its gates are always open, and from it flows the river of life that waters the tree of life, which feeds and heals all the nations. The imagery is lush and complex, but it becomes clear as you listen carefully that what John sees is less the rebuilt temple of Solomon, and more the garden God first intended as the dwelling for all humankind—the place where, in Isaiah's earlier vision, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-- its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain”.

Now let me take a leap here with you—hold tight, because it is so foreign to the way we are used to dealing with Revelation if we deal with it at all. Imagine that what John is trying to evoke in the minds of his readers is not what will come at the end of time, but the church as we are called to *be* the church right here and now: imagine that Jerusalem, to borrow from the title of a wonderful article by Robert Gundry, is not a place for people but a people *as* place.¹ What John describes is not a place reserved for us in far off heaven, but a way that we are called to *be* in this world.

Now look back at that imagery, and see what it says to us. Two things stand out to me. First, at the center of our existence is not some dark tabernacle that only the holiest may enter, but the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. The lamb, without blemish or sin, who was slain to bear all the iniquity of the world. Another image from my childhood races to mind—at the high peak of the sanctuary in which my faith was nurtured was that ancient symbol of the Lamb of God,

¹ Robert Gundry, “The New Jerusalem People as Place, Not Place for People”, *Novum Testamentum* XXIX, 3 (1987) pp. 254-264.

holding a bright flag. And it was explained to me back then that the one who gathers us into community is the one who knows our brokenness and has already healed us. It is not the victorious Christ, with battle flags waving, leading us out to defeat the sin of the world, but the one who stretched out his arms on the cross, who then shapes us into a community that does not judge, but welcomes.

And the image challenges the church to consider if we might be a community like that, as well: one whose center and purpose is not the enforcement of our own brand of righteousness, but is literally the gathering place for all the broken souls in this world who hunger for a healing touch. To be sure our reading ended with the careful admonition, “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood”. But the thing that I don’t think was sufficiently clear to my Wizard of Oz sort of faith as a youth is that the purity of this Holy City is not of our choosing, and most certainly not our doing. Remember, it is the lamb who sits at the center welcoming us. If we are here it is not because we have done anything to merit our presence. We are here because God himself has wiped away every tear from our eye; kissed us, and made us whole.

And then, if it is true that what this revelation is all about is not some place of eternal rest, but a call to the church to live God’s truth in our world, I realize that my tears have been dried, not just for my sake, but so that through me the tears and trials of all the nations might also be dried, and comforted—that the calling of the church is to bring the *nations* together in the hands of a loving god. We are not to be a Holy Temple of Righteousness that siphons off those who are good enough into a heavenly realm. We are to be the vessel by which the rich bounty of God’s love and compassion makes its way *out* of the Holy City, and brings water and life to the world.

Gail Ricciuti, who teaches at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, in writing on this passage notes a fascinating contrast to the other eternal river that would have been familiar to those who read John’s revelation: the River Styx, that separated the living from the dead. “The Styx,” she writes, “fearful, magical, taboo—was also known as deadly poison and the classic symbol of death...Revelation shows us a kind of contrasting flood plain of Grace: a Venice of canals flowing through all the streets...The nations that come to this city, one imagines, are not only washed by the water of life, but they quench their thirst in it. It is a kind of double sacrament.”²

The question, I realize, 35 years later, is best put, not: are you *saved* but “Are you Saving?” Not, have you stored up enough of God’s grace to get you through the eyes of the needle, into the temple’s holy place, but are you a vessel of God’s holiness in this world, allowing our very brokenness to be the way in which the healing waters can flow—a double sacrament, not for us, but for the world.

Let us pray.

² Gail Ricciuti, “Revelation 21:22-22:5”, *Interpretation* 53:02 (1999) pp. 183-184.