

Revelation 21-22  
December 9, 2012  
First Baptist Church, Vancouver  
Darrell W. Johnson

**HERE COMES A NEW CITY**  
(Second in a three-part Advent series)

So ... what are we waiting for? Not only during the season of Advent, the season of intentional waiting, but throughout the year, and throughout the years, what are we waiting for?

The text before us today is the text we read last Sunday and will read again next Sunday. The text is the last two chapters of the last book of the Bible; chapters 21 & 22 of The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. These are the chapters in which the Living Saviour of the universe, pulls back the curtain on the future which He has shaped. We're not going to read every line of the two chapters, but we are going to read enough to help us see what the apostle John saw, enough to help us see what Jesus Himself wants us to see.

I invite you to open your Bibles to Revelation 21& 22, and listen to the future according to the One Who holds the future:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

(Revelation 21:1-6, 9-11, 16-19a, 22-24; and 22:1-5)

These two chapters are so rich! So very rich! Canadian NT scholar Paul Spilsbury puts into words what I feel after hearing the text again: the apostle John “piles image upon image and picture upon picture so that we are almost overwhelmed, trying to imagine the details of the vision” [*The Lion, The Dragon & The Throne*, 146]. Or as another scholar says, the text is so full at some point “the imagination goes on strike” [Daniel Russell, *Preaching the Apocalypse*].

Now, before delving into the text in detail, I want to speak to a criticism that could be leveled against us, against me, for what we are going to do today, and did last Sunday and will do next Sunday. The criticism is that taking time to reflect on the future has no relevance to living today. The criticism is that reflecting on the future diverts us from dealing with the really important issues of the present; it diverts us from the pressing tasks at hand. Some would even say that reflecting on the future is a cop-out, yet one more way believers try to escape the hard and harsh realities of the present. As the old saying goes ... and I have heard it in the church ... “Those with heaven on their minds are of no earthly good.”

If by “heaven on their minds” one means the popular idea of people sitting on clouds strumming harps of gold, I agree: reflecting on such a future is a royal waste of time. But if by “heaven on their minds” one means the picture painted in the Bible, and especially the picture that Jesus paints for the apostle John on the prison island of Patmos, then I disagree. Reflecting on that picture is not irrelevant at all! Indeed, I submit to you that those with this picture of the future are of the most earthly good.

The fact is, we humans cannot but wonder about the future, for a number of reasons. One is that we humans live in three tenses: in the past, in the present, and in the future. Some of us live more in the past, some more in the present, and some more in the future. But all of us to some degree live in all three tenses. “The present moment” is seldom purely present. Every “present moment” partakes of the immediate past and of what we anticipate about the immediate future. The “is” always participates in the “was” and the “will be.” Yesterday, today was tomorrow, and tomorrow today will be yesterday. No one lives in the present without some sense of the past and of the future.

By the way, this fact has practical implications for spirituality. The tense each of us tends to live in – past, present, future – shapes how we pray. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus frees us to pray about all three tenses. But the way each of us naturally tends to pray is shaped by the tense in which we prefer to live. This also shapes how we read the Bible. It also shapes how we relate to other people. It would be fun to unpack that in a Saturday teaching session!

It is right for us to do what we are doing today for another reason. Every human being has some sense that there is more to the future than simply more of the present. Every human being has some sense that there is more to come. In yesterday's Vancouver Sun, a person commenting on the Mayan calendar's supposed prediction of the end of the world on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December quotes Robert McLeman of Wilfrid Laurier University. Professor McLeman says "There's a latent concern in everybody that maybe there's something out there that they should be aware of." I like to quote Woody Allen: "I don't believe in the after life, but I am bringing a change of underwear." Just in case. Because we all sense, deep in our soul, that something more is coming.

It is right to do what we are doing today for yet another reason. The way we live in the present is automatically shaped by our view of the future, usually unconsciously so. But how we live today is shaped by what we think tomorrow brings. If you followed me around for a week or two, watching how I live, you could deduce what I actually believe the future holds. The decisions we make regarding time and money automatically and clearly reveal what we think about the future. The quality of the present is shaped by our experience of the past, but it's also shaped by what we think is coming in the future. This says to me that we want our vision of the future to be as accurate as possible!

And there is yet one more reason why it is right for us to do what we are doing today, the most important reason of all. The Christian vision of the future is not just the projection of a human wish-dream. The first Christians did not dream up the vision. The apostle John did not dream up what he writes in Revelation 21-22. The Christian vision of the future was given to us, by Jesus Christ, by the One Who claims to hold the future in His hands. If He is right about the future then we cheat ourselves by not reflecting on it!

Revelation 21:1 – "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." THAT is the future. A new heaven and a new earth. I want to quote again what Eugene Peterson says about Revelation 21:1:

"The biblical story began, quite logically, with a beginning. Now it draws to an end, not so logically, with a beginning. The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of Revelation. The product of these beginning and ending acts of creation are the same: 'the heavens and the earth' in Genesis, and a 'new heaven and new earth' in Revelation. The story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its second word" [*Reversed Thunder*, 169-170].

This means that the Christian vision of the future is not escapist. It is not an escape from reality as we now it, it is a redeeming of reality as we know it. This means that no one who has read Revelation 21-22 would ever carry a placard with the words, "The End is Near." The Christian vision of the future is not about an End. It is about a Beginning. If you're going to wear any placard it should read, "The Beginning is Near."

Thus a city. Revelation 21:2 – "And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as bride for her husband." A city. It is the city that was shown to the prophet Isaiah centuries before, but not as clearly, because Jesus Christ had not yet come and the Lamb had not yet been slain. A city.

Not a garden? Many people are initially disappointed as Jesus opens His vision of the future. Because for many people the cities of this creation are not that inviting. As beautiful as many cities of this first creation are, they are places of violence and oppression and injustice and decay and death; for they are often places set up to escape the presence of the Living God, and cannot help becoming places of violence and oppression and injustice and decay and death.

Look! A city, says John. A city unlike any city any city-dweller has even seen or ever imagined.

“Come down from God,” says John. Created by God – created by the Creator. A city we have longed to build but do not have what it takes to build. We did not make the first creation, and we do not make the new creation. It is a gift: “Come down from God.” It is the ideal city, and therefore, in many ways, the antithesis to all our cities.

Look at Revelation 21:9 – “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” In the way John conveys this part of the vision of the future, he is intentionally drawing a contrast, a contrast with Babylon and all her many incarnations.

Earlier in the book, in Revelation 17:1, John writes: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great harlot ...’ Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There was a woman ...” whom John learns is representing Babylon.

The new city, the new Jerusalem, the bride, is all that Babylon, is not. Historians tell us that ancient Babylon was one of the great wonders of the world -- stunning architecture, beautiful gardens, arranged in a nearly perfect square, surrounded by decorated gates. But, sadly, the city was rotten to the core.

It was known for unbridled sensuality, selling everything by sexualizing it. Can you imagine that? Unchecked, unmitigated injustice, the gap between the rich and the poor getting wider and wider. Violence at every level of society, even in its sports – can you imagine that? Deceit and manipulation in politics and business. Temples built for hundreds of gods, one temple (Etemenanki) called “Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” The city called itself “the navel of the universe,” the centre of civilization. Can you imagine any city of our time saying things like that?

Carried in the Spirit into a desert to see the harlot;  
Carried in the Spirit to a high mountain to see the bride.

The new city, not only everything Babylon and her incarnations are not, but qualitatively more than any Babylon could ever be.

A new city, already existing, one day “coming down.” John conveys what Jesus shows him using all kinds of images and symbolism -- images and symbolism stretching our imagination, blowing the circuit boards of our minds, and filling our hearts with hope.

In my book on The Revelation of Jesus Christ, I walk through the vision looking at what is not there in the city and what is there in the city. Seven “not there’s.” Seven “is there’s.” Today I want to take a different approach. I think we can gather up all the imagery and symbolism in Revelation 21 and 22 around three words: Earthy, glorious, intimate. The city which Jesus Christ is bringing with Him is earthy, glorious, and intimate.

Earthy. The new city coming down from God is very earthy. Not earthly, that word suggests a moral assessment, usually negative. Earthy, material, like the stuff of the present creation. So John sees stones and gems of all colors, he sees walls and gates and streets, he sees trees yielding fruit in their seasons, he sees rivers, one filled with eternal life. A real earth. With real creaturely-ness and creativity.

I had the privilege of studying with the great NT scholar George Ladd, who would regularly remind us that the Bible “always places men and women on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.” God originally made us earthy, earth-bound creatures. In Jesus Christ, He will fulfill that original intent on a new earth.

Earthy. The city of God is very earthy. Our destiny is not to “go to heaven.” Our destiny is to enter a new heaven and a new earth.

Is this not one of the implications of Christmas? What happened on the first Christmas? God took up our humanity, and became one of us. The Creator became a creature. God clothed Himself with our flesh and blood. We worship an earthy God.

And is this not one of the implications of Easter? What happened that morning? Jesus of Nazareth, God-made-flesh, rose from the grave bodily. In a new body, yes, but in a body nevertheless.

And is this not one of the implications of the Ascension? What happened when Jesus was taken up in a cloud? God-made-flesh, God-resurrected-in-flesh, took His seat on the throne, in the flesh. A human being sits on the throne in a real body, a real earthy body. The second Person of the Trinity became human ... forever. The Trinity now exists in a new mode. Humanity is there within the inner life of the Trinity. God loves humanity. God thinks it is good to be human. God likes flesh and blood. And has chosen to take up earthiness into His being forever.

So contrary to popular opinion, the Christian vision of the future is not “other-worldly.” It is “new-worldly.” The Christian hope is not to be stripped of our creaturely-ness; that is a Gnostic hope that has infiltrated the church. The Christian hope is to be stripped of all that has kept us from realizing the goodness of our creaturely-ness.

BTW: this has very practical implications for spiritual disciplines. We are spiritual creatures, yes; but creatures. We do not relate to one another just in our heads. We relate with our eyes and ears and hands and feet. So we do not just relate to God in our heads. We relate to God with our eyes and ears and hands and feet. We pray as embodied creatures. We pray with our hands. We pray with our knees. Every spiritual discipline – prayer, study, worship – involves the use of the body.

Lift up your hearts, say the Psalmists. Lift up your heads. Lift up your hands. Get down on your knees. Love the Lord your God with your whole self – mind, heart, soul, spirit ... and body.

Earthy. The future is earthy. Can someone say, “Hallelujah”?

What John sees in what Jesus shows him is that the new city is freed from all the consequences of sin that have ruined this creation.

What is the first thing he saw? Revelation 21:1 – “and there was no longer any sea.” Does he mean that the new creation has no source of water? No. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, for John the sea is a symbol for chaos. The sea represents the power of chaos unleashed in creation by human sin, threatening to suck the world into the void of nothingness. You can see it at work all over the world today. “There was no longer any sea.” In the new city chaos is no more!

And what does John hear the voice from the throne say? “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall no longer be any death or mourning or crying or pain.” Those are all consequences of human sin, and they are no more – taken away. Sin and its awful fallout are taken away.

And how is the throne described in the vision? As the source of the river of life, flowing with healing and wholeness. The city saturated with the life of God. What a city!

And, says John, the curse hanging over the first creation because of human sin is gone! Revelation 22:3 – “No longer will there be any curse.” Gone! Because the Lamb was slain.

One more sign of earthy. Revelation 21:4 – “the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it,” into the new city. In the 1st century, kings represented their respective cultures, so for kings to come in is to say that cultures come in. The beauty of the new city is that all cultures come in. All cultures get redeemed and come in.

Revelation 21:3 – “and they shall be His people.” The word is plural not singular. “And they shall be His peoples.” Peoples and cultures are not obliterated in that new creation, Irish, Scots, Filipinos, Poles, Brazilians, Chinese of every sort, Armenians, Thai, Swedes, Mexicans ... the list goes on. All redeemed ... and all included in the new city. What a world that will be!

Oh, and yet one more thing. The price tags get switched. Gold is so plentiful it loses the value it had in the first creation, and it simply becomes the asphalt to pave the streets. Earthy. Very earthy.

The image of gold leads to the second word around which we can gather the images and symbols of Revelation 21-22. Glorious. Revelation 21:22 – “The city shone with the glory of God.” 21:23 – “The glory of God gives it light.”

The word “glory” – *doxa*, as in Doxology – does mean luminosity, but more fundamentally, refers to the “heaviness of a thing.” Something is glorious because it is inherently weighty. And therefore luminous. “Glory of God” is a way of saying, “the luminosity of God’s inherent weightiness.” In the new city, glory is everywhere, it shines everywhere. Everywhere in the city God manifests His inherent weightiness. Everywhere in the city God shines forth.

The glory came upon and rested on the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Now the glory fills the new city! Which is what the imagery of gems and jewels is telling us: the whole of the city shimmers like diamonds and jasper. God’s glorious presence everywhere, unmuted! Because of this glory, there is no need for the light of the sun and moon. John is not saying that there is no sun or moon, just that there is no need for the light of the sun and moon. The glory of God shines so brightly there is no need for any other light!

Because of this ubiquitous glory, there is no need for a temple in the city. A huge surprise to John a life-long Jew. How can humans relate to God without temple? Revelation 21:22 – “I saw no temple.” Why no temple? Because the whole city is sacred space. There is no need for separate sacred space – it is all sacred. Revelation 21:3 – “Look!” says the voice from the throne, “the tabernacle of God is with men and women and He will live with them.” Everywhere, all the time, no need for temples – for the trappings and the ritual of religion. Hallelujah!

But there is more to it. There is no temple, because God Himself is the temple. Revelation 21:22 – “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” Mercy – I cannot get my mind around this. God Himself the temple where we meet God? The Lamb the temple where we meet God? No more division between sacred and secular, God is everywhere present and accessible in the new city. The city full of the light of the glory of God.

And then another of those dramatic moments in the drama Jesus put on for John. John sees all the light in the city. He sees all the glory shining in the city. And he wonders, naturally, where it all comes from. John searches the city, up and down the streets of gold. As Richard Mouw puts it: John finally sees “a figure standing at the point where the light shines most brightly, and cries out with recognition: ‘its lamp is the Lamb.’” [*When the Kings Come Marching In*, 60].

Revelation 21:23 – “the lamp is the Lamb.” I still remember the moment when I first saw this. We were living in Manila. I was praying and reading on a particularly discouraging day. “Its lamp is the Lamb.” I had to get down on my knees – the source of the glory of God is the Lamb. The source of the radiant luminosity, the inherent weightiness of the Living God, is the Lamb who was slain. The crucified Jesus is the source of the glory of God. He is the lamp of glory now and forever more.

One more image of glory. John gives the measurements of the new city. Revelation 21:16 – “the city is laid out like a square, as long as it is wide.” 12,000 stadia long; 12,000 stadia wide. 12,000 is clearly symbolic numbers. 12 tribes of Israel. 12 apostles of the Lamb. 12 x 10. A complete number. 12 x 10 x 10. A really complete number. 12 x 10 x 10 x 10. A really really complete number.

Symbolic. I remember my dad trying to calculate the size of the new city, treating the numbers as statistics, to see how much space each person would be given. 12,000 stadia = 1,500 miles. 1,500 x 1,500 = 2,250,00 square miles. I had to remind him, “It’s a symbol, dad.” 12,000 – a really, really big number. It’s a way of saying, not to worry – there’s enough space for all of God’s redeemed people.

But notice Revelation 21:16 again: “The city was laid out as a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long.” Whoa ... wait a minute. As high? You don’t measure cities with length, weight, and height, do you? As high as it is long and wide? We are now talking a cube, are we not? The square city has become cubic city. Does this mean that we can live on the square ... or in air parcels?

This past week, Jonathan Bird of our congregation sent me some of his notes he uses to teach on the meaning of cities. He points out, as we did earlier, that Babylon was laid out as a near perfect square; the new Jerusalem is a perfect square. But more, a perfect cube – a city of harmony and symmetry in perfect proportion.

But there is more going on. Remember, John is a life-long Jew, steeped in the Old Testament. He sees a city shaped in a cube. Where would that take his mind? What in the Hebrew Scriptures is a cube? The Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and Temple. The most sacred space in the sacred space is shaped like a cube. Do you see what John sees? The new city is a cube, meaning, that the new city is the new Holy of Holies! No wonder the city shines with glory – it is the most sacred space of all sacred spaces!

Which leads us to the third word around which we can gather the images and symbols of Revelation 21-22. Intimate. Life in the coming city partakes of an intimacy with God no one ever imagined possible. And we will focus on that next Sunday, because we have seen enough for today.

I think the best way to respond to what we have heard and seen is to pray, and I'm going to invite us to pray using the words written by Canadian hymnist Margret Clarkson:

“Our cities cry out to You, O God,  
from out their pain and strife;  
You made us for Yourself alone,  
but we choose the empty life.  
Our goals are pleasure, gold, and power;  
injustice stalks our earth ...”

“O healing Savior, Prince of Peace,  
Salvation's source and sum,  
for You our broken cities cry –  
O come, Lord Jesus, come ...  
bring to the earth the city of our God!”