

WE SHALL SEE HIS FACE
(Third in a three-part Advent series)

Well ... there are only five days left. Not to finish your shopping, you have 8 days for that. According to one interpretation of a sophisticated ancient calendar ... there are only five more days until the world ends. December 21, 2012. According to one interpretation of the Mayan calendar, the world ends this Friday. You may have seen on the front cover of today's *Province* a calendar of December 2012, with 21 burning and the headline "Preparing for Doomsday."

For 27 families of Newtown, Connecticut, it probably feels like the world ended last Friday. Unleashing of unspeakable, unexplainable evil. As you know, many commentators are saying that we have now entered a new world, a different world. Or better, we have now been awakened to a world that we have inadvertently been creating. Clearly we need a Saviour. Clearly we need Christmas, not just the holidays!

According to a recent IPSO poll of 16,262 people around the world, 10% of the world's population believes all the buzz around the Mayan calendar. Of the 1,000 Canadians polled, 9% believe that Friday is the last day. I would like to interview those 90 people. I would like to ask why they believe this. More importantly, I would like to know how they plan to spend the next five days. For, if they truly believe the prediction they would live the next five days differently, right?

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is coming again. Right? We believe that He could come any day. Right? And because we believe this we live differently than the people around us. Right?

Robert McLeman, Professor of Environmental Studies at Wilfred Laurier University, whom I quoted last Sunday, argues on scientific grounds that it is highly unlikely the world ends this week. For he notes that according to NASA the next asteroid posing any threat to the planet is not due until 2040. Which gives us at least two decades in our new facilities!

For Christians, there is a better reason not to believe that December 21 is the last day. Jesus, for Whom we are waiting, said no one knows the date of His coming -- no one but His Father. Throughout church history, and especially in the last two centuries, a number of believers seem to believe that they knew more than Jesus knows, and have proposed the time of His coming. Bless their hearts -- they have all been wrong. 100% of the time. 100% of those who think they've de-coded the Bible and found the date have been wrong. No one knows, says the Master; no one.

Could be December 21st.
Could be December 24th.
Could be next year.
Could be in the next decade.
Could be in the next century.

The important question for the Bible is not “when?” but “what?” **What happens on that day – what happens when He comes?** Thus our Advent question: “So, what are we waiting for?”

The text before us today is the one that has been before us the last two Sundays. The text is the last two chapters of the last book of the Bible, chapters 21 & 22 of The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. I am not going to read every line of the chapters; but as we did last Sunday, I will read enough to help us see what Jesus especially wants us to see about the future He has shaped.

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!”

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 angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. 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.

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.

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people Amen.

(Revelation 21:1-5a, 9-11, 15-17, 22-24; 22:1-4, 7, 12-13, 16-17, 20-21)

The essential message of all the imagery and symbolism of the last chapters of the last book of the Bible is clear: He is coming, and He is bringing with Him a new creation. Jesus is coming, and He is bringing with Him a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Saviour of the world, the One Who even now reigns as the ruler of the kings and queens of the earth, is coming, and is bringing with Him a new city, a city so precious to Him that it has to be called, “The bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

Coming. City. Those two words will serve as the outline I will follow today. Coming. City. He is coming, and bringing with Him a city.

Coming. “I am coming.” “Behold, I am coming.” Three times for emphasis. Revelation 22:7 – “Behold.” “Look!” It is a command. “Look! Look! I am coming.” Revelation 22:12 – “Behold, look, I am coming.” Revelation 22:22 – “Yes, I am coming.” Soon. All three times – “soon.” “I am coming soon.” “I am coming soon.” “I am coming soon.”

Jesus always puts this in the present tense – “coming.” Not just “will come.” But “coming,” in the process of coming. Yes, He will come in the future. But even now, in the present, He is coming. Always coming. Which is why it is always “soon.”

It is His promise to come. Which, I think, is why He refers to Himself as the Root and Offspring of David. Revelation 22:16 – “I am the Root and Offspring of David.” He Himself, Jesus Himself, is the fulfillment of promise. Promises God made to David His chosen King. Promises God made about David His chosen King. Promises that we read in texts we often read during the Advent-Christmas season, like Isaiah 11: “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse (David’s father), and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him...” I think Jesus calls Himself the Root and Offspring of David to help us trust His promise to come. It is as though He says, “Look! I Myself am the fulfillment of promise. I Myself am proof that God keeps His promises.”

He is coming because the grand story is incomplete without His coming. As I have expressed it before, the meaning of the incarnation (Christmas) is incomplete without His life and ministry on earth. The meaning of His life and ministry is incomplete without His crucifixion on a Roman cross. The meaning of His death on the cross is incomplete without His resurrection from the grave. The meaning of His resurrection is incomplete without His ascension to the throne of the universe. The meaning of His ascension to the throne is incomplete without His pouring out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And the meaning of His pouring out the Holy Spirit is incomplete without His coming again. We can trust His

promise to come because it is the inherent goal of the story; the trajectory of the story, in which God has invested His whole Self, leads to His coming.

Coming. Always coming. Soon. Soon? Yes, it is always soon, because He is always near. When Jesus left the earth, when He passed through the clouds, He did not go to a far place. Heaven is not far away, not far away at all. When He ascended into heaven He did not go far away. He is always near at hand. Which is why His coming is always near at hand.

When He comes He is not coming from a far place. He doesn't have to travel far – He is near, just behind the curtain. In order for Him to come all He has to do is pull back the curtain. Apocalypse – open the curtain. Which is why He calls Himself “the Bright Morning Star.” Revelation 22:16 – “I am the bright Morning Star.” Oh how I love this title! The morning star only appears in the sky when the night has reached its deepest level of darkness. When you see the morning star you know that the night has ended. Oh, it's still dark outside when the morning star appears. But when you see the morning star you know that the sunrise is near, at hand. It may still be a few hours until you see the sun, but when you see the star you know that the night is over. Once you can see Jesus Christ in the darkness, you know that the darkness has ended, even if the darkness is still there for a little while.

He is coming. Even now. Always soon, always near, always at hand. Thomas Torrance of Scotland put it best: “The New Testament does not think of the difference between the presence of Christ here and now and His Second Advent so much in terms of a passage of time as the difference between veiled and unveiled.” [*The Apocalypse Now*, 186] Right now he's veiled, one day he will be unveiled, and all He has to do is open the curtain, open the door. He is coming.

And bringing with Him a new city, the city of God. The city Jesus describes in His Apocalypse using all kinds of images and symbols -- some stretching the imagination, some which are hard to put together. As I suggested last Sunday, I think we can gather up all the imagery and symbolism used to describe the city in Revelation 21-22 around three words.

Earthy.

Glorious.

Intimate.

The new city that is coming is earthy, glorious, and intimate.

Earthy; not earthly, but earthy. Gems and trees and streets and rivers. Material stuff; real material, just not materialistic. Our destiny is not to “go to heaven,” but to go to “a new heaven and a new earth.” The future Jesus has shaped for us is an embodied future, real flesh and blood creatures on a real earth. A transformed earth, to be sure. No pain, no crying, no decay, no death! But earthy nevertheless.

And glorious. Oh, so very glorious! The city shines with the glory of God. Everywhere, says John. Glory: the luminosity of the weightiness of the Living God. Because God is who He is, God shines with luminosity. Glory flowing, glowing, shimmering, oozing, radiating in every quarter of the city. The Living God, in great delight, manifesting Himself everywhere. In the Prophets we read lines like, “The whole earth is full of His glory.”

This earth – full of His glory. If we have eyes to see. On the new earth it will all be so clear – “The whole city full of His glory.” And in a dramatic moment, John makes the great discovery that the source of all that glory that is Jesus. Revelation 21:23: “The lamp is the Lamb.” All the glory, all the light, all the splendour of the new creation flows from the Lamb Who was slain. This has to be one of the greatest statements about the person of Jesus ever made. The source of the luminosity of the inherent weightiness of the Living God is the crucified Nazarene. Glory is finally found in sacrificial love. The glory of God that fills the new creation flows out of the One Who lays down His life for the life of the world. “The lamp is the Lamb.”

And in another dramatic moment, John discovers what he would have never imagined. “I saw no temple.” No way! How can humans relate to God without a temple and all the ritual that goes on in temple? No temple. How can you have a city without sacred places? No temple. Why no temple? For two reasons, both reasons stretch the imagination to the breaking point.

One reason there is not temple is because the whole city is a temple. Indeed, the whole city is the Holy of Holies. John watches as the angel measures the city. 12,000 stadia long, 12,000 stadia wide. A perfect square. Whether that is actually how it actually is, is not the point. A perfect square, the symbol of perfect symmetry and order. 12,000 stadia long, 12,000 stadia wide. And 12,000 stadia high. High? Long, wide, high? A cube? The city is a cube? Well, maybe not actually so; again, whether is actually a cube is not the point. The cube points to a great wonder. And John, as a life-long Jew, steeped in the Hebrew Bible, would have gotten the point in short order. The only thing in the Bible shaped as a cube, a perfect cube, is the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple. Long, wide, high - the new city is the new Holy of Holies! The new city is not only a temple ... it is the most sacred space within the temple. The new city is the dwelling place of the Holy God.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” we read at Christmas. God the Word came to this earth and took up residence among us. On the new earth in the new city God takes it all the way: God chooses to dwell everywhere in all His holiness. No more divide between sacred and secular. God has taken up residence in a way no one ever dreamed God would! No need for a temple when the whole city is the Holy of Holies of the temple. And no need for a temple for another reason.

Ready? God Himself is the temple. Revelation 21:22 – “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” As I said last Sunday, I cannot get my mind around this. The Almighty and the Lamb are the temple? God the Father and God the Son are the temple? If the city is the Holy of Holies of the temple, then how can God be the temple where the Holy of Holies is centered?

Is the vision not mixing metaphors? Which is it: is the city the temple, or is God the temple? Which is it, John: God dwells in the city, or the city dwells in God? Which is it: God dwells in us, or we dwell in God? In his speech to the philosophers in Athens, the apostle Paul made the claim, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” In the Living God, Who comes to us in Jesus, we live and move and have our being. In the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we live and move and have our being. Is the imagery of Revelation 21-22 suggesting we can now say, “In Him the city lives and moves and has its very being”?

God not only lives in the new city, the new city lives in God? No longer any barrier between God and His creation? One in a way no one ever imagined? God is us, we in God. No separation. God still God, we still distinct creatures. But now, completely one? Wow!

In the Prologue to his Gospel, John says that Jesus Christ dwells in the bosom of His Father (1:18). Is John in the last chapters of the Revelation now saying that as Jesus lives in the bosom of the Father so we in the new city dwell in the bosom of the Father? And not only we, but the city itself? Is John saying that the new city lives and moves and has its being in the bosom of the Father?

Which leads us to the third word which gathers up the imagery and symbolism of Revelation 21-22. Intimate. Of course! The city coming with the coming Jesus is earthy, glorious, and intimate. We will experience a level of intimacy we never thought possible! The angel calls the city “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” Life in this city partakes of the intimacy of husband and wife! I can see Jesus referring to the new city as His inheritance. I can see Him speaking of the new city as His prize possession. But as His wife? Is there any more intimate image than that of bride and groom, husband and wife, lover and beloved?

So we are not surprised to hear the language of covenant. Revelation 21:3: “They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” Echoing all the covenants God has made over the centuries in the first creation. “I will be your God, and you will be My people.” This is a way for God to say, “All that I am I give to you. All that makes Me Who I am I place at your disposal.”

In the new city the covenant is realized to the max. Everything that God is God gives to us. As His people, as disciples of Jesus, as sisters and brothers of Jesus, and as the Bride of Jesus. Intimacy ... beyond what any of us ever hoped for.

Why? Why can we experience the love of God in such an intimate way? Because the Lamb was slain. Because the Lamb has taken away the sin of the world. Because the Lamb has overcome all the obstacles that keep us from God. “I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

And then we read Revelation 22:4. Oh mercy, mercy, mercy. “They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.” They will see His face. We will see His face. From other texts in the Bible we know that we will see other faces too. We will see the face of those who have gone before us. We will see the face of Abraham and Sarah. We will see the face of Moses. We will see the face of king David, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. On it goes ... faces of those who walked by faith on this earth.

We will see the faces of those who helped us walk by faith on this earth. I will finally get to see the face of C.S. Lewis, and of Karl Barth, and of Lesslie Newbigin, and Amy Carmichael, and John Stott, and Margaret Clarkson, and E. Stanley Jones, to whom I owe great debt. I will see my grandmother’s face again. Oh what a moment that will be! I will see my dad’s face again. I have so much to tell him. I will see the face of all of those whose Memorial Services I have led. I will see our son’s face. Oh dear Alex. And with all those I have mentioned, I will see the face of the Saviour of the world. I will see the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And so will you.

The face into which the Virgin Mary adoringly looked on Christmas Eve. The face into which Joseph proudly looked on many days after. The face into which the elderly Simeon looked when he held the infant Jesus in his arms, and sang, “Now Your servant can depart in peace, for my eyes have beheld Your salvation.” The face Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene looked with wonder that such a face would love people such as they. The face that doubting Thomas looked into and cried out, “My Lord and my God.” A face full of compassion. A face full of mercy. A face full of wisdom. A face full of light. A face full of life. A face full of love.

Moses was told while on this earth that he could not see the face of God and still live. On the new earth we will be given what Moses could not have. "They will see His face."

As children grow they like to look into faces, especially the faces of their parents. It is as they look into faces that they develop a sense of self. It is as they look into faces that they develop a sense of the world. And I think that as we grow into adulthood we long for a face that helps us know who we are.

We long to look into a face that gives us security and hope and meaning. Whether we know it or not, we long to see the face of God. It is one of, if not the deepest longing of the human heart. Moses, the great leader of the great liberation movement, has everything a human being could ever want. And yet he's not satisfied, for the cry of his heart is, "Show me Your glory!" Let me see You as You are. Throughout the Psalms the exhortation rings: "Seek His face." "Look the Yahweh and His strength; seek His face continually" (105:4) The greatest fear (and frustration) of the Psalmists is that God turn His face away.

"How long, O Yahweh?
Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?" (13:1)

"Why, O Yahweh, do you reject me
and hide Your face from me?" (88:14)

The longing is expressed in Psalm after Psalm:

"Cause Your face to shine on me, on us."

"May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make His face shine on us" (76:1)

Psalm 80:

Verse 3 – "Restore us, O God;
make Your face shine upon us,
that we may be saved."

Verse 7 – "Restore us, O God Almighty;
make Your face shine on us,
that we may be saved."

Verse 19 – "Restore us, O Yahweh God Almighty;
make Your face shine on us,
that we may be saved."

And then Psalm 27, verse 8 and 9:

"To you, O my heart, He has said, 'Seek My face.'
Your face, Yahweh, I seek.
Do not hide Your face from me."

Oh, let your heart soar: “They will see His face”! No longer hidden -- “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” For I shall see the face I have been searching for all my life.

“And His name shall be on their foreheads.” Revelation 22:4: “They shall see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.” Name stands for the character of a person. To have His name on our foreheads is to have His character reproduced in us. Of course – we become like that on which we fix our attention. As John says in the letter we call First John, “We know that when He appears” – when He pulls back the curtain – “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

Coming ... and bringing with Him a new city. An earthy city. A glorious city. An intimate city.

No wonder the last book of the Bible ends on the note it does. “Come!” Three times. Revelation 22:17 – “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” Revelation 22:17 – “And let those who hear say, ‘Come!’” Revelation 22:20 – “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

It could be this Friday. Could be Christmas Eve, or Christmas Day. Could be next year. Could be the next decade. Could be the next century. No one knows. But this we know... when He comes, and when he opens that curtain, we shall see His face, and we shall become like the most beautiful human being Who ever lived.