

# New Life in the Big City

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME*

Sunday, November 19, 2017

**Scripture:** [Revelation 21: 1–6, 22–25](#)

## Introduction to the Scripture

This Sunday is the last of our fall confirmation classes. So we wanted to end with a bit of an ending. Occasionally, you may hear Mary and I try to sum up the Bible this way: it is the collection of our ancestors' writing about God's hope for wholeness, through a garden, and through a city.

I think we've landed on these images because one of us was born in Waldoboro, where, let's just say, there's still a lot of garden around, and one of us was born in a city that is really part of New York City's orbit. But there it is: the scriptures start in a garden with Adam and Eve, and end with Jesus's resurrection in a garden, where he meets a woman who loved him and could tell his story. They start (about midway through) with King David's central creation of Jerusalem... and end in today's scripture.

This book, *The Revelation to John*, the last book in our modern bibles, gets a lot of play in our culture. It's in lots of spooky stories, in science fiction, in disaster movies. You can tell why when I give you its Greek name: *Apocalypse*, which actually doesn't mean the end of the world... it means something like *unveiling*. It's a letter to 7 churches trying to figure out how to live in their cities, in their communities, and in the empire that surrounds them... and what they're living for.

At the end, they find a healing and hope in a city:

## Sermon

I think I come by my fascination honestly: I was born, and grew up in, a city that was built on blueprints in this scripture. New Haven (New Heaven, get it?) is the country's first planned city: a perfect square of squares, meant to be a scale model of the New Jerusalem. This stuff matters, because our ancestors have been taking it seriously for a long time. If you wear a Pilgrim Hat this week, just know that our ancestors dressed funny and plainly, partly because they were pretty sure the world was going to end soon. A lot of them thought that they were coming to America to build a new, holy city, just like the one we read about here. They tried Massachusetts... everyone needs a first draft.

*Revelation* always sounds like science fiction—you know, Star Wars scale, battle of good and evil stuff—and like poetry... it's kind of both. Though it is endlessly talked about outside of church, we're not big fans of talking about it inside. Every major figure of the Protestant Reformation tried to either remove it, or downplay its place in the Bible. Mostly, they didn't trust people with it.

BUT, They didn't know how much *you know*: that you know our ancestors used their religious imaginations to write scriptures that were larger than life, so that we would know they were true to life. Just like the prophets that we started with in October, this is apocalyptic story-telling: which uses

mystical terms to give hope to oppressed people.

**This is the story of a mystical response to the question: where, and to who, do we belong as Christians?** Put another way, it's about faith and politics.

It stood as a message to churches that were trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus, all while living in the richest, most military empire that had ever been. One that regularly asked its citizens to worship the empire itself, its army, and its leaders.

This is only a big deal once you realize that we live in the richest, most military empire that has ever been. And we should be very careful when people try to get us to worship a country, or its leaders, or its military might. It's on us to figure out how to be good citizens of our country, but—above that, and at the same time—citizens of a community that we call the Church. Here and now, not in some far off afterlife.

*Revelation* has been misused in all sorts of ways throughout our Christian history: it has been treated as a spell-book, made to inspire all sorts of fortune telling for individuals and nations, often for the benefit of individuals and nations.

Even worse, people have used *Revelation* as a promise of a far off future. This book was meant to be a source of strength and support to oppressed people, but has been used to keep them in chains. Because if you can make the new Jerusalem be some place in another life, in another earth all together, you can convince people that whatever pain they're feeling now doesn't matter. "God will wipe away every tear," slave masters intoned seriously, all while causing the pain which brought more tears.

In our cultural language, it's probably important to note the two things that **aren't** in here at all:

1. There is no mention of the rapture, the idea of true believers removed from the world and from history made popular here in the U.S. in the *Left Behind* series.
2. There is no great battle of good and evil, despite what I just said. There **is** a great, white-robed army of martyrs, led by Jesus, come back with a sword: the sword is *in his mouth*, so it's Jesus come to *speak* powerful truth, and though the forces of good are victorious, they never fight. Just like an army led by Jesus: never fighting, always winning.

What **is** in here is this image of the city of God made whole. An image of connection and welcome and relationship. The scripture says "all nations stream to its light."

You are all in the midst of being and becoming Christians, which from time to time has been a really unpopular thing to be. The early church, to put it simply, freaked the Roman Empire out. They were a Jewish group, committed to the life of Jesus, who hadn't gotten on well with the empire. They were kind of cult-y. They were radical communists, for one thing: the process of joining the church involved selling all or most of your belongings, and giving the proceeds to the communal pot. They worshipped primarily in each other's homes, partaking in a shared meal which they gave a lot of significance to. They —for their time—radically accepted women in leadership roles, yet had very prudish thoughts about marriage and relationships. They didn't participate fully in the market economy, or the everyday ritual and sacrifice that surrounded them, and, most importantly: they really didn't think much of the worship of the emperor.

You will, if you're doing it right, freak people right out following Jesus. Because Jesus challenges a lot of the political and social structures of our time: things that dehumanize us, separate us, that fail to honor the image and love of God in and for each person... And that can make this life hard, sometimes. It can be hard to have unpopular opinions.

This book was meant to give hope, in this life: hope that injustice will always fall under the weight of its own self-seriousness, and that God's love will renew us when we need it most. This book was made to point to a holy city where God's presence would connect us all, and God's compassion—and our own—would flow through the streets. As members of the United Church of Christ, we claim that heritage of people who believed that we could help in God's construction work: making this life worthy of Thanksgiving, making it possible to enjoy this life and our chance to improve it for others. That our call as Christ's body here on earth was to be about participating in the building of that holy city that exists between us all, between God and us.

Because, the new, holy city of Jerusalem, comes *down*, comes to this earth right here... its light, its center, its source of living water is God's presence. It is a radical symbol of being, once and for all, out of the king business. Out of the politics of power business, and into the politics of the polis, the care and comfort and wholeness of all people. It is also out of the temple business, the worship of idols, and images of big dudes on mountain tops, flags and eagles, and all that... all that replaced by the worship of God come to dwell in us all in humanity and humility.

This is a radical image that is unveiled here: if we are going to be citizens of this life, this new city, this new heaven... we have to ask ourselves, what do citizens of this city do while we live in our cities as they are? Because you can have a death penalty, but you are a citizen of a city where death will be no more. We can debate immigration policy in our states and in our country, but we are citizens of a city where the gates are always open by day and *there is no such thing as night*. We have work to do on environmental policy and clean water for all people at every level of government, but we are citizens in a place where the water always flows, and it gives and sustains life.

Enjoy this life, we say. Because here, and now, God has invited us into the amazing image and possibility of the new city, the new garden. Grow things here, pave new pathways to the center of the heart of God here, build homes for each other here, feed each other here, be changed by each other here, drink living water here... Give thanks! BE THE CHURCH. Here.