

Revelation 21: Vision of the New Jerusalem

⁹Then 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." ¹⁰And in the spirit^[f] he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; ¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵The angel^[g] who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles;^[h] its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits^[i] by human measurement, which the angel was using. ¹⁸The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth

chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And 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. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But 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.

Revelation 22: The River of Life

22 Then the angel^[a] showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life^[b] with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants^[c] will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And 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.

⁶And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants^[d] what must soon take place."

Kerra Becker English

May 1, 2016

The Holy City and the River of Life

Rev 21 & 22

Cities and rivers - the two seem to go together, even now. Richmond loves being nicknamed a "River City" but by no means is it the only town with such a distinction. In this vision, the river flows through the middle of the city's main thoroughfare. The river and the city enrich and complement one another. And the things that John of Patmos envisions about both are strange and wondrous. They don't really compute in the known world, and I don't think they are meant to. The city is described as a cube, which would be in our modern day measurements, 1500 miles in each direction, wide, long, and tall. That's at least as long as the drive would be from Florida to Maine. Then stretch the width of our nation from the eastern shore to the Midwest as the crow flies. And if you then measure the distance to space, roughly speaking, you leave the earth's atmosphere at about a distance of 50 miles from the earth's surface, a lot less than this 1500. This is not, I repeat, this is NOT an ordinary city before you even get to the streets paved with gold with 200 foot thick walls made from precious stone and gates made each from a single gigantic pearl.

It's a fantastical place, a dream city, which John means to render as both like and incredibly unlike the Jerusalem of then or now. If you are at all like me, maybe from time to time you dream of places that are both familiar and unfamiliar to you. The houses of dreams aren't much like the real world either. I'm always adding rooms, finding hidden passageways, and discovering novelty at every turn. They move and shift and shape forming meaning related to my

inner architecture rather than conforming to some outward architecture that makes sense in the “real world.” Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila was known to describe her sense of spirituality using the metaphor of an interior castle, with each room closer to the center as a place that revealed more and more about God.

I think that for us to understand what is meant by the revelation of this holy city we will need some tools designed more for interior dream-work rather than grabbing for drafting tools to map out the blueprints of heaven imagined as this New Jerusalem. So what are the tools of the imagination? How do we go about seeing, more out of the corner of our eye than by direct observation? We look for symbols. We ask questions of the images. We allow our subconscious to elicit feelings about light and darkness, about trees and rivers, and places of healing. In our mind’s eye we picture this wedding where the Lamb of God marries the Holy City as his bride. That’s not like any wedding I’ve been to lately – but we ask, “What kind of feelings do weddings invoke?” And then perhaps we also wonder, “Why does the number 12 come up so many times in these two chapters of scripture?”

Have any of you been taught to approach scripture this way, through imagination and deep questioning? Probably not many! Typically the church has wanted to do your thinking for you rather than have you imagine or interpret for yourself. It keeps things more decent and orderly that way. It makes for fewer outliers to the approved doctrines and polity. Therefore, unfortunately, most of us are taught that we have only two interpretations of scripture – true or untrue. That’s a pretty limited means for understanding, because in our world of proofs and verifications, if something’s not literally true, it’s determined to be false. These two chapters certainly are not texts to read literally. If you do, I can almost guarantee that it will hurt your brain. And yet, John still uses the word “true” in his own reflection on this text. As in, “These

words are trustworthy and true,” finishing that statement with, “the Lord has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.” I don’t know of any cities that fit this description, do you? But is there another way to approach this vision OTHER THAN saying that it’s false because we have yet to discover a city that has lived up to this prophecy? Is there a way to value this text for its internal truth? Can we somehow fit this wild vision into our own understanding?

I think that there is. That’s where I stand in the gap between the Biblical literalists and those who would toss out the Bible as un-provable and therefore fictitious. Metaphor can speak truth. Visions can speak truth. The Holy City and the river of life are meant to reveal spiritual connection, hope, meaning, purpose, joy, and the love of God. Those things are true even though this 1500 mile cube that John recognizes as the holier version of Jerusalem is neither historically nor do I expect it to be futuristically accurate.

So what does John mean for us to hold true about that river city or for that matter for us to see in our own metropolitan river city? I’d like to show you a few things I see in the text. And I’m going to use the dream-work lens to try to get at what it could mean. Here’s how that works. Rather than say that I know for sure what it means, like Biblical scholars and preachers sometimes do. Here’s how I was taught to approach the study of dreams. If I were talking to John about his vision as if it were a dream, I would say to him, “John, if this were MY vision, I would want to explore what’s going on with that wedding between Jesus and the Holy City. Who marries a city?” Why do we ask it like that? We do that because John may interpret it totally differently, OR he might see something that was puzzling to him because of my questions and wonderings. So here goes.

If this were MY vision, I really would be asking why Jesus needs a bride, a rather unusual bride at that. Surely the Holy City is beautiful, bejeweled, and pleasant – but what will they be able to do together that they couldn't do apart from each other? We all know that marriage is a significant status changer, and yet the two parties remain separate entities from each other. Who was this Lamb, before and after? What did we know about this city, before and after her encounter with Jesus? John very much wants to connect old Jerusalem with new Jerusalem, the era of Israel's chosenness with the current belovedness found in Jesus Christ. If this were my vision, I'd ask what my own interpretations were of the number 12, 12 tribes, 12 apostles, 12 trees. Why 12? If this were my vision, I'd also wonder about the unwieldy size of this city. Is it really meant to represent nations, or encompass all the diversity of the human race. Is it easy or difficult to get into this city? What about the light in it? Is it glorious to not have nighttime, or does it feel artificial? In this great city, how does the river provide healing? John says that the river and the trees alongside of it bring life and healing. How does nature do that for us?

As we ponder these questions, often truth is unearthed just as a dream can offer us insight to truth about ourselves. We already claim that God's word is known to us in two ways, claimed in our questions for ordination: God's word is, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and it is also God's Word to you. The church in its institutional unwieldiness has not always done a good job in preparing folks to receive scripture directly as God's word. It's good at the first part – being the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, but bad at the second – helping folks learn to hear God's word for themselves. More likely it was a grandmother or grandfather, a wise elder, Sunday School teacher or skeptical religion professor who sent you to scripture to find out what it said for

yourself. It seems weird to say, but up until recently, I had really only learned to be that church operative myself. I'm glad for the re-discovered skills I learned at Richmond Hill that took me back into the pages of scripture to learn, not just for preaching, but for my own learning and guidance. Being able to see truth in the unlikely passages like these was part of that learning.

Cities and rivers – they go together. People are drawn to water for life. People are drawn to other people for connection, commerce, cooperation, and companionship. These are hubs of human activity – and as such they become living, breathing entities. They are lovely. The bride of Christ – and in this version, it isn't the church, it's the Holy City, the Living River, the whole of creation really as John describes it. Jesus loves it all. God loves it all. God loves us all. Amen.