

Sermon: City of God

Revelation 21:9-22:5

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Have you heard the song that contains the line 'I don't know where I'm going but I'm on my way'? I know Dionne Warwick used it, and Paul Simon.

I do not know where I am going, but I am on my way.

It sounds like an existentialist quote. It does not matter where we go, as long as we are going. The value is in the going, not in the arriving somewhere.

Maybe a good line for a random holiday :) But the line was actually first used in a song in 1917, about an American soldier enlisted to fight in Europe in World War I. "I do not know where I am going, but I am on my way."

I would like to suggest that, generally speaking, being on our way without knowing where we go, is rather problematic.

For a child to randomly walk five kilometers is awful. But if the child knows of the ice-cream shop in the end, the walking is much easier.

If we are born with a silver spoon in our mouth, life may be quite bearable. If we are like most people, we have to work much, we face opposition, some days the going is hard.

To know where we are going helps us to walk with assurance as we walk in the right direction and we know the goal.

Where are we going?

The last few pages of the bible give us a wonderful image of where the world is heading. And it shows us how to walk today. Today we can already enjoy the fruits of that future.

1. the bride of the Lamb

John was carried to a high mountain in the Spirit. In the Bible, you may have noticed, mountains are seen as places close to God. God gave his laws to Israel on a mountain; Jesus was transfigured on a mountain; John sees a vision on a mountain.

An angel tells him, "I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

The bride, the wife of the Lamb, that term is used in the Bible for the followers of Jesus Christ. He is the Bridegroom, and we as believers belong to him. He cares for us. He loves us. We are united with Him. We, collectively are his bride.

It is good that the Angel gives John this introduction, because what you see does not immediately make you think of the church.

What do we see? "The holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God."

Before we look at some of the details of that city, it is good to be aware that obviously, the new world that we move towards, will not come about by us building a sort of Holy City on earth.

Of course we do all we can to make life on earth better for all. But, then suddenly we have another war or a disaster explode in our face. Of course we try to be good stewards of our world, and then another famine or a tsunami.

We try to make our world a better place. But in the end - we know that only God will bring the salvation, the renewal, that we are hoping for.

That should not make us less eager to do the will of God today, even in politics, in economy, in the world of ecology, in speaking out against human rights abuses; we do want to obey God in this world, and we do this with energy given by Gods Spirit himself, the energy that we get by looking at where we are going.

As Christians we work hard, and we wait for God.

2. the city

This city that John sees, it has the glory of God. This means that God himself is present. His presence is really all that counts. He gives glory to all things by his presence. This is true in our life all well. If he is involved, things are better, more enjoyable, more perfect.

This Holy City that descends from heaven is described in some detail by John. It is 12000 stadia wide, 12000 stadia long, and 12000 stadia high. A perfect cube. And it is large!

The length of a stadium in Roman times, was 185 meters. So this city of Jerusalem is 2.200 kilometers high, wide, and long. These measurements are so wildly big and strange, that it seems clear that we must not take this as a literal description of a city.

But that we already suspected, as the vision was introduced by: "This is the bride, the wife of the Lamb."

The size of the city, 10x10x10x12 stadia, signifies completeness and it points to the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 apostles.

The city of God, Jerusalem, is the city of all the people of God, the complete people, throughout the ages - the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles are even specifically mentioned. Everyone who belongs to the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament, is part of the new Jerusalem.

Therefore here, we have here the church of God of all ages. The people who suffered in this world. Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Paul, Good Christians, not so good Christians, people who worked hard, people who did not know where they were going, people who were very goal-oriented, men, women, children.

All the people of God will be together in the end of this world - in heaven, with God. And when the time comes, they will be God's instrument for the renewal of this world. They will be God's people to fill the earth with his glory.

You and I, and your great-grandparents, and your children's children, they will all together be with God, and one day we will all descend, receive our new bodies; our new life; and this creation will be renewed.

That is the direction of this world; that is the direction of your life. So walk on, with hope in your heart. A new future is dawning.

I already mentioned, the thing that marks this new city of God that will fill the earth, is that God is present in his glory. At the heart of the city - in the midst of the community of saved humankind - John sees the throne of God and of the Lamb.

This presence of God is very tangible - because there is no temple in the city, no walls, no curtain to keep us away from God. Heaven and earth are now reconciled.

The Lord God and the Lamb, Father and Son, they are there - they themselves fill all space with their presence. And the Spirit is there - the glory of God, the light of God.

Four times in the verses that we read Jesus Christ is seen as a Lamb.

Even in eternity when God has made all things new, we will be reminded of the source of our salvation. That is the love of God as expressed in a Lamb that was slaughtered for us. Even in eternity in the very throne of God, there will be a reminder of the suffering of God for our benefit.

Today we must of course also be reminded of this grace of God. How can it be that He died for me. That is why we celebrate holy eucharist. And that amazing moment in history, when he died for us, will be remembered eternally.

And because of this goodness of our Lord, the throne of God in the midst of the new Jerusalem, is not something scary. We do not see thunder and lightning as the sign of his presence - we see a river with living water flowing from under the throne of God. The river flows through the city, through main street, and it makes everything alive.

As today we kneel before the throne of God, we look at the lamb that was killed for us, and we receive healing, forgiveness, blessings from our Lord. God offers healing to the nations, even today. We are those nations. We are the people he blesses with his healing work.

One day, when the New Jerusalem descends from God, when those who died in Christ will raise from the dead with new bodies, we will fill the earth as renewed, fully healed people. But glimpses of this we already experience today, with God's presence, forgiveness, healing.

3. the nations

"The tree of life is for the healing of the nations." Do you remember from the first pages of the Bible, how the access to the tree of life was blocked for humankind? Adam and Eve messed up so badly, that angels guarded the access to the tree of life.

In beautiful "mythological" language we learn that humankind from its earliest beginnings, messed up. We could not really access God anymore; the tree of life was inaccessible to us. We did not know where we were going...

Angels guarded the Garden of Eden, so there was no access to God and to eternal life for humankind. The gates of the New Jerusalem are also guarded by angels, but John sees that the gates of the city are always open. The angels do not keep people outside anymore, they invite people in.

Because even the nations that made life for the people of God hard, even those nations are no longer a threat. Their kings no longer rule with injustice. In the everlasting kingdom of God, there will be no more oppression, no sin, no evil.

In the Old Testament we have prophets who predicted that the law will go out from Jerusalem and that the nations will come to listen. Here we have it! In the end, all nations, all rulers, have submitted to the Lord our God.

And whatever is precious - their glory and honor - they lay at the feet of God and the Lamb.

That is what we are heading for. A world that honors and glorifies God.

So we better start doing that today. We know where we are going, we are on our way.

In the New Jerusalem, we will see God's face; this indicates the most intimate relationship with God. The Bride of the Lamb will look its Bridegroom in the face.

As even today we already have a relationship with God, although not by far to the extent that we will one day enjoy.

And all people have the name of God written on their foreheads. We will be branded - owned by God. That puts us in a very safe place - because He takes care of what he possesses.

But even today we are marked by the Holy Spirit; He is like a deposit in our life. God already owns us - today. So today we are already secure.

John sees in his vision that the only human inhabitants of eternity, are those people whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb.

So today we be sure that we belong to God, that we know him, that our names are written in God's book.

So even today, we already participate in the New Jerusalem that will one day descend to our world.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read something about this:

But you have come to [...] the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Even here on earth, by our faith, we already participate in the New Jerusalem.

We know where we are going, we are on the way. And the road we are on, is the road that is defined by how our New Jerusalem life will be one day. Well, that is how it should be. The road of Jesus Christ.

conclusion

So let us trust in God and not despair when the days are hard. God has a bright future for you and this future is already breaking into your life today. We cannot hold the future back.

In that eternal City of God nothing impure will enter, nor anything shameful or deceitful, therefore today we keep ourselves far away all that from all that.

We can know God and the Lamb of God - today.
We are owned by God - today.
We already honor and glorify Him.
Our names - they are written in the book of the Lamb

If by faith we hold onto Him - our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.