

May 26, 2019
Revelation 22:1-6
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“The City of God”

Good morning!

A cab driver reaches the Pearly Gates and announces his presence to St. Peter, who looks him up in his Big Book. Upon reading the entry for the cabby, St. Peter invites him to grab a silk robe and a golden staff told him to proceed into Heaven, and said, “Thank you for your work on earth.”

A preacher is next in line behind the cabby and has been watching these proceedings with interest. She announced herself to St. Peter. Upon scanning the preacher's entry in the Book of Life, St. Peter furrows his brow and says, "Okay, we'll let you in; take that cloth robe and wooden staff." The preacher is astonished and replies, "But I was a pastor on earth; I dedicated my life to Christian service. Isn't my works as valuable as that cab driver's?"

St. Peter responded matter-of-factly: "Here we are interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabby drove his taxi, people prayed."

(You have no idea how many pearly gates jokes I read until I found one I could share from the pulpit)

This is one of my favorite Sundays of the year. It isn't because it's an occasion to honor those who have given military service and even their lives for our country -- although I know that's an important occasion; it isn't because it's a three-day weekend -- less exciting when Monday is usually my day off, although it will be nice to spend the day with Tim; it isn't because of the Indianapolis 500 race,

although that is big deal to some McFadden family members; it isn't even because Karen Lewallen was leading worship on a Sunday that I am here. Nope, none of those. It's because of this text from Revelation 22. It may be a text you're familiar with, but even if you haven't been tracking Revelation along with us the past few weeks, if you've spent any time at Creekside, there is an image in this text which you might have seen around. Any ideas? Yes, it's the Tree of Life.

The tree of life is just one of several images which we get at the beginning of Revelation chapter 22: and all of those images are in the service of describing the larger concept of the City of God. That description begins back in chapter 21, and continues into chapter 22. It's a pretty amazing architecturally: building materials of jewels and crystals, kind of an interesting layout from a city planning perspective, too. Although John of Patmos doesn't call this city "heaven," it is the city which has come down from heaven and it is the place where God dwells. Revelation 21 is where we get the idea of a city with gates made of pearl and streets paved with gold. This is the crescendo, the final imaginative flourish of what the fulfillment of God's kingdom will look like -- not just the materials and structure of the buildings, but especially who will be there and what they will do: the folks who are written into the Lamb's book of Life who worship the crucified and resurrected Christ.

It might not be the best layout from a zoning point of view, because there's a river right down the middle of the street, and a tree on either side of the river, which sounds a bit tricky. This tree produces 12 kinds of fruit: a different kind each month. If you read the description of the holy city in Revelation 21, the number 12 is everywhere: walls with twelve gates with twelve angels each, inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and outside the walls three gates on the east, south, north and west for a total of 12. I could go on -- John the Revelator does. The importance of the number 12 is that it represents fullness, or wholeness. 3 groups of four or four groups of three, it is a round number. 12 kinds of fruit is not accidental: it signals completeness, abundance and fulfillment.

If we remember where else we have seen something like a tree of life in the biblical record, we have to go back a ways: back to Psalm 1,

where the psalmist compares the righteous to trees planted by streams of water or even further back to the beginning, to Genesis and the Garden of Eden -- the last time that there was anything like heaven on earth. In the middle of that garden, where a stream flowed out of the center to water the earth, there grew two trees: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Only one tree in the garden had fruit that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You know that story -- Eve and Adam ate that fruit and were banished from paradise.

65 books later at the very end of the biblical collection and at the end of time, humanity has finally made it back to the tree of life from which they were banished in the beginning. Here again is the crystal pure life-giving water, and this time, there is one tree on either side of the river and it produces twelve kinds of fruit. One tree! This isn't just a return to the original Garden of Eden, this is a garden which has been upgraded and multiplied and transformed to be the dwelling place of God.

I want to show you some images of the tree of life -- because it's fun, and hopefully instructive -- and talk about why it is so meaningful to me that Creekside has adopted this image as part of our vision as a congregation.

[Slide 1] Other cultures besides Judeo-Christian have a tree of life as part of their story. This Celtic tree of life emphasizes that the earth and heaven, material and spirit, human and divine are interwoven. Trees were sacred because they were a bridge between earth and heaven: rooted in the ground with leaves in the sky, and roots and branches echoed each other in shape.

[Slide 2] This is an actual three-dimensional sculpted object, but it isn't a real tree. Do any of you recognize it? It's the tree of life from Disneyworld, patterned after the baobab tree which grows on the African savannah. It's beautifully constructed, but it isn't a living tree.

[Slide 3] This is a photograph of a real tree: I'm pretty sure there's been a lot of photoshopping and color enhancement going on here, because it's almost too beautiful to be real. There's even water in the background.

[Slide 4] This is a panel from a stained glass window installed at Browne Street Community Church in Flushing, New York; the subject of these windows is actually Revelation 21 and 22. Louis Comfort Tiffany gets credit for this, but it was actually designed by Tiffany landscape designer Agnes Northrop in 1903, who dedicated this set of windows to her father. If you look very carefully, you might see something like this elsewhere in the church today.

[Slide 5] This is clearly an illustration of our Revelation text, with the water. There are twelve trees instead of one tree with twelve kinds of fruit, but it captures the dreamlike quality of the saints gathered by the river of the water of life. About 15 years ago when a group from Creekside -- Pastor David Bibbee, Sabrina Fritz, Judy De Pue, Betty Kelsey and me, I believe -- started working on a vision statement and came up with Rooted in God, Growing in Jesus, Bearing Fruit in the Spirit. This Revelation text as well as the trees from Genesis and Psalms were ones which influenced that process.

[Slide 6] Our vision is not only a tree, but a tree planted beside the water (the creek side) of God's love, the water of life. When I designed the two-dimensional tree with leaves and fruit, I chose to make that fruit purple and orange. Why? Because no natural tree has fruit like that. I didn't want it represent an apple tree or a plum tree or an orange tree; I wanted to represent the tree of life. Anybody can grow an apple tree or a plum tree or an orange tree: it takes a community of people committed to the vision of Jesus Christ and the living water of God's love to be a tree of life.

I think a congregation needs to have a vision for things which are impossible for us to do without God's help: a vision beyond caring for ourselves and our facility, beyond paying our bills and balancing the budget. Of course those are important and necessary things, but they aren't visionary in the sense of embodying the city of God in the world, of bringing heaven to earth. This vision of Revelation is a great big, expansive, flourishing image, full of things that no group of human beings can make happen on their own. Listen to some of this stuff: "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit producing its fruit each month; and the leaves are for the healing o the nations . . . the throne of God and of the Lamb will

be in it and his servants will worship him . . . they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” That is great stuff. That is a great vision. That is not going to happen without God’s help.

Remember the two central questions of Revelation: Who is worthy of my loyalty? And Who is going to win? Do you know the answer to those questions? Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. The finale of Revelation is not the angel, the river of life, the tree of life, or even heaven, or the City of God. The finale is the worship of Christ, around the throne of God and of the Lamb. Christ is worthy of our loyalty and Christ is going to win, and in the end we won’t need the light of temporal things like lamps or suns -- those are going to pass away, because Jesus Christ will be our light forever and ever. The vision of Revelation is ultimately a vision of worship, because worship is where eternity is headed, and one of the most important things we can do along the way. Worship is the answer to the questions Who is worthy of my loyalty? and Who is going to win? Worship is the light of Jesus that shines in our lives, to the nations, and will ultimately live in the city of God forever. All and all God’s people said Amen.