November 1, 2015

Revelation 21:1-7

Our series--living into our vision at Park: ***We will be a vibrantly Christ-centered, multiracial, multiethnic, intergenerational instrument of transformation, actively engaged with our urban neighborhood and our world.*** (That’s a mouthful! And I’m praying that God would continue to inspire and renew us as a church to live those words—that they wouldn’t be just words but would be actions—actions we’re known by, here at Park…) So turn with me to Revelation chapter 21…

I want to begin with a confession, this morning—something my friends tell me is good for the soul… So here it is: I get uncomfortable with too much talk about heaven—that’s my confession. It’s not that I have trouble believing heaven’s real—that’s always made sense to me. I haven’t needed to question the biblical promise—to question whether there’s a place prepared for us to spend eternity with God--some people struggle with that, but I ain’t one of ‘em! No, my trouble is when too much thinking about there leads to irresponsibility about here—it’s when people think too much about then and fail to do what needs to be done about now… That’s what troubles me on the whole ***heaven-talk*** thing…

I think of slavery as an example of this--the profoundly disturbing truth that “so-called” Christians who owned slaves in this country tried converting those slaves to their “so-called” faith, only to turn right around and use the promise of heaven to keep those human beings from seeking their freedom--told them that, yes, while there is indeed suffering in this life, well, guess what—“Jesus has promised that in ‘the sweet by and by’ there’ll be a place of no more bondage--just bear with your slavery, and the promise of heaven will one day be yours” (that unspeakably evil distortion of what God intends the Christian faith to be—using one’s faith as the means of exploiting another human being? That is abhorrent to Almighty God!)…

And while it’s an admittedly extreme example, the fact of the matter is that it still goes on—in far too many places—same old song, just a different tune... *Since the day will one day come when the wrongs of this world will finally be set right*, *why, just suffer patiently*. To which I say, why not those of biblical faith giving ourselves over now to the work of justice—why not working to bring heaven down to earth—why not a refusal to abide the evil of those who would pacify the exploited with some kind of lame promise of heaven, and all in the name of Jesus… No wonder an unbelieving world writes off Christianity when they see that stuff going on!

So, there you have it--my consternation on the whole “too-much-heaven-talk” thing… But even though that’s been my deal—I need to tell you what God has also been doing with me—how, the more I sit with people who have lost a lot in their lives—people who have suffered greatly--the more human suffering I get asked to walk alongside--the more I begin to understand the power that a promise of heaven can hold in somebody’s life… That’s the other side of the coin, for me… It’s people like the Apostle John…

See, we’ve come, this morning, to the end of the Bible—to John’s vision of heaven. And it’s not so much an ending—what we’d expect--as much as it’s a beginning—a fresh start. John says, “Then I saw a **new** heaven and a **new** earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” In other words, the creation that got wrecked by human sinfulness in Genesis is **restored** here in Revelation—put back together--means there’s going to be a **completion** of what began, way-back-when... And here’s the **big** surprise: John’s vision of what heaven’s gonna look like is the vision of a **city**: “And I saw the holy **city**, a New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband” (verse 2).

Now, I read that, and I’m thinking, “Must be some mistake!” See, I’m a city kid--didn’t grow up in a town where “everybody knows your name.” **I** grew up in a place where you could get lost in the shuffle, and lots of people did—they got lost… And while many urban centers in this country have experienced renewal in recent years, we still tend to associate urban life with problems, don’t we?—the problem of noise, the problem of traffic, of pollution—the problem of road construction; it’s crime and violence, over-crowding and poverty (and more road construction)... Cities aren’t the only places bad things happen, but lots of bad things do happen in the city—making it not exactly a picture of where eternal peace and joy gets lived out…

In fact, most world religions picture heaven as a restoration to the natural—it’s getting back to the garden--back to unspoiled wilderness. Which makes more sense to us, doesn’t it? When we want renewal—when we want a restoration of our minds--our spirits—when we want to rekindle intimacy with God or others--what do we do? We leave the city for the country, right?--go off to the wilderness—go on retreat—go “get away from it all”—which is some variation of Eden, of paradise--a place we’re apt to call “heaven on earth.” We think that since human sin resulted in an expulsion from a garden, well, shouldn’t our salvation be a return to a garden? Gardens are quiet, after all--smell good…



We stroll in gardens, contemplate—aren’t in a hurry--“smell the roses”--commune with God in the cool of the evening. Never mind that there’s all those weeds to pull—that’s not what we think about when we think about gardens, hopeless romantics that we are... It’s all peace and quiet in the garden—all heavenly…

But cities—cities are noisy—they billow smoke—everybody clamoring for space and attention…



In the Bible cities are characterized as places forgetful of God--defiant of God--places people get abused, get led astray. The first city mentioned in Scripture—Enoch--was built by the first murderer—Cain--got destroyed in the great flood at the time of Noah, Enoch did, because it was a place of such evildoing. Second city—Babel—“let’s build a tower up to God!”--just an arrogant attempt to storm the gates of heaven, right there--wound up being abandoned in a whole mess of broken languages, Babel did... And on it goes…

Innocence gets lost in cities. I was in Chicago doing graduate work--learned the first summer I was there that in that one U.S. city, over 1,000 of its citizens were murdered that year... And I remember one of my colleagues—a pastor from Northern Ireland—remember Albert being so appalled at what he saw happening in Chicago. We were hanging out one day--4th of July--he says to me, “Will, isn’t it ironic, that in a country where it’s illegal to have fireworks on your nation’s birthday, everybody’s got a gun?” He said, “Since 1968--when our holy war began in Northern Ireland—there’ve been 2,000 people killed in religious violence, making the whole world aware of our struggle. So I’m supposed to believe that in one U.S. city that many people will die at the hands of violence in just two years?” (And by the way--that conversation was 20 years ago—leaving us to wonder how much has really changed, right?--given the carnage we’ve seen here, in our own community/nation, the past year/month…)

What could possibly be heavenly about a city? But that’s what John saw--he saw a new heaven, a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And the new heaven was the holy city, the New Jerusalem, the place where God’s son had been rejected--that place now transformed; for the one seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things **new**.” Makes me wonder: could it be that we enter heaven not by escaping the things we don’t like, but by the sanctification of the very place God has put us--the very place where the brokenness has occurred? See, there’s not so much as a hint of escapism here in John’s vision. This isn’t some long weekend away from the responsibilities of our work or our relationships or our citizenship in the world. No, the heaven found in the pages of Scripture is a place where those struggles get healed. Eugene Peterson put it this way: (that)

*Heaven is formed out of dirty streets and murderous alleys—out of adulterous bedrooms and corrupt courts—out of hypocritical synagogues and commercialized churches—out of thieving tax collectors and traitorous disciples: it’s a city—yes--but now a holy city…*

And that’s the good news of the gospel—that we who have suffered loss, even loss of our own doing, will one day know the peace of having that loss forever reconciled--that which was broken made whole again--a place where every tear will be wiped from our eyes, where death will be no more, where mourning and crying will be no more. That is heaven. And it’s there, yes, but it’s also right here—right on the corner of 34th and Park.

If we were to read on ahead a ways, we’d come to perhaps the most important blessing in John’s vision—the one that envelops every other blessing. It’s there in chapter twenty-two, verse four: ***They will see his face****,* John says. It’s what God is after--that nothing at all would come between you and God, between me and God—no veil, no curtain, no shame, no ocean, no misunderstanding. We will behold the living God face-to-face. It’s how the Bible ends, with a beginning. Heaven is a holy city living in harmony with God; heaven is a bride, alive in intimacy with God; and the city and the bride, why, that’s you, that’s me…

And then one last thing—something I had to read again and again before I saw it. It’s the fact that the heaven John envisions *descends--*it comes down to us. God is pursuing us, don’t you see—right up to the end. It’s because it’s never been God’s style to stay in the safe immunity of heaven. God descends, bends down, stoops—stoops to the city that is us—stoops to redeem us, to take us home—what we’re about to celebrate in the baptismal remembrance and service in just a few minutes, this morning—that God has made the first move in loving us, in making a way for us to be reconciled to him and to each other…

There’s an old story of a student who went to a famous elderly rabbi--said, “Master, in the olden days, there were people who could see God--why is it that nobody sees God anymore?” To which the old man answered, “My child, nowadays nobody can stoop so low.” You and I are pursued by a God who will stop at nothing, even stooping so low as to relinquish all power and glory to come to us as a human baby, that we might know his love and forgiveness…