



We have no idea just how much people thousands of miles away from us desperately yearn for the words from Revelation to become a reality as soon as heavenly possible: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals. [God] will dwell with them; [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and

pain will be no more.” Unfortunately, it is in the very city of Jerusalem, the place where so much hope and joy and new life was unleashed on the entire world; it is there where so much mourning and crying and pain emerges day after day after day.

It was a little over ten years ago, when I was fortunate enough to be part of a seminary class that took a trip to what is, oddly enough, referred to as the *Holy Land*: the Holy Land that is, evidently, not beyond the range of the normal human hatred and rage and violence thrust on one another. It was no different when we got on that plane from Columbus to Tel Aviv, Israel. It was yet another time in that place’s disturbing history, when missiles were exchanged between warring groups in Palestine and Israel. We knew the tensions would be high. We were made aware that there would be certain historical places of interest on our itinerary that we could no longer see. We were also told of how intense the security checkpoints would be: from the airport to the different stops made by our touring bus.

We stayed in Jerusalem for a few days, and it did not take long to realize the new Jerusalem as described in Revelation was absolutely nowhere to be found. To put it mildly, there was mourning and crying and pain for Israelis and Palestinians, and they did not seem to trust the other for any hope of peace whatsoever in that supposed “holy” city and beyond. And it was while we were there that one day we got on our bus, and we were stopped longer than usual to go through a security checkpoint. Israeli soldiers started walking up the aisle with rather large weapons in their hands, and they stopped by the row of one of us students whose skin color was more tan than the rest of us, as if the soldiers were wondering if we were trying to hide a Palestinian in our midst. And so, they interrogated him, right there on our bus that was meant to be nothing more than getting us from point A to B in our learning about the Biblical times itinerary. The look on his face made the harsh realities of not just Jerusalem and the surrounding Holy Land, but throughout God’s world: that we all desperately yearn for the time and place when God can wipe away our tears of mourning, and that pain, in all its disturbing forms, will be no more.

In the meantime, we hope that the church is the place and the people to offer such a long sought-after sanctuary for all children of God. Except, unfortunately, we have had our moments of walking up and down aisles on Sunday mornings not with physical weapons to intimidate others, but with penetrating glares and side comments that we think should not matter at all; and yet, still bring about guilt and shame and a desire for certain children of God to never return to a church building ever again. Initially, they come curiously looking for the slightest possibility that God can indeed dwell among us mere mortals, but they leave wondering if God wants to be with them at all, if God’s supposed own living disciples in the church will not welcome them with open arms.

Because that same young man, who was not overly welcomed in the supposed Holy Land, a young man not from Palestine, but from Pennsylvania; was also not so sure he would be truly welcomed by the church either, if the church ever were to find out more about his life. After all, this young man was gay, but he didn't have the guts to say it out loud, even in a seminary that was rather progressive in attempting to accept all children of God. Nevertheless, he wasn't so sure it could be true: that the church, that God could truly, *truly* love him. That, perhaps, all those words of supposed acceptance from congregations and seminaries, even in Scripture, were really nothing more than just words on a page.

Thankfully, soon enough, the Holy Spirit empowered him to proclaim who he was to the church, and not only was he accepted, but he continues to powerfully serve in the wider ministry of the body of Christ. On days like today, you will find him playing the organ and serving as the director of music for a large Presbyterian congregation in North Carolina. And yes, his music sounds just as beautiful and uplifting and Holy Spirit-infused as anyone else playing an instrument to the glory of God. Somehow, God found a way to wipe his tears in a holy embrace, tears that could often not be seen by his siblings in Christ. It was as if God and God's church, could not only love him, but believe that he has something wonderful to offer to make God's church a better place and people for the rest of the world to benefit.

So, suffice it to say, the new Jerusalem as described in Revelation is not here just yet, but that will not stop God from shaping the church to be a glimpse of it: to be a people of acceptance and love and hope. So that the tears will be not of those of a young man living in fear and wondering if God's unconditional grace is for him, but they will be tears of gratitude and joy as he belts out the organ pipes to convince the rest of us that there is absolutely no limits to this God in adoring all of us, no questions asked. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: from TouristIsrael.com*