**May 26, 2019**

**Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5**

 In last week’s introduction to the book of Revelation we were reminded that this book was a word of hope at a very scary time for the Jewish and early Christian people. Revelation promised restoration and belonging for those who had lost everything and everyone. This book promised that God would set the world right, as it was always intended to be. Unfortunately, Revelation’s story has been hijacked, distorted, and manipulated by extremists and opportunists; it takes work for us to ignore their words every time we read this book. But if we don’t hear HOPE when we read these verses, we’ve been duped. If we don’t see LIFE, we’ve misunderstood the book. This is the epitome of good news. Revelation is the promised happy ending to our biblical romance. This story tells how God will sweep us off our feet into a blessed eternity. Now listen again to the word of God for the people of God:

 **Read Revelation**

 According to the book of Genesis, a long, long time ago, God made everything that existed – sun, moon, trees, sky, water, animals, plants, *and* people. These people were made by God’s own hands and lived in God’s garden. They walked with God and talked with God. They knew God’s voice and God’s daily patterns, just as you know your own family members’ habits and personalities. But then evil interrupted. And the people were sent away from God’s garden. And while God went with them and still spoke to them, it became harder and harder for people to hear God. Certainly no one saw God anymore. The relationship with God was strained and fractured, becoming more and more distant. And this is how it has been since that time long, long ago…

According to Revelation, after generations upon generations lived apart from God, finally God will draw us back to God’s immediate presence. God Immanuel will be with us. God will expand the garden to make room for everyone. No longer a quiet garden for two, God has built a City with room for everyone in creation – all those who have died and all those who are living. We don’t have to go to a different level of creation or even take a train to get there; God will bring the City down to us.

It’s worth thinking about the change from a secret, guarded garden to a city. Whereas a garden is full of natural life and color, the original Garden of Eden was an exclusive location. It hosted a small piece of what creation would grow to be. Two became four. Four became eight. And so on and so on. As people procreated, wandered, learned and expanded, they became more diverse. New skills were honed. New languages were spoken and new songs were sung. Creation grew into a melting pot that those first two people could not have dreamed. After those first people left the Garden in Genesis, the people never returned – to that particular garden or any other. Instead, cities became the safe places. Cities became the rich places. Cities attracted traders which guaranteed supplies, even in times of famine and shortage. People went to cities for justice and wisdom in times of peace and conflict. Cities became the epicenters of learning and spirituality. Especially Jerusalem – the city where Jewish people built the Temple and worshipped God and made their faithful home.

Now, of course, when we hear “The City” we think about New York City, home to over 20 million people (when we include the large metro area). It is teeming with diversity and activity, personalities and languages, though the flavors in our melting pot doesn’t always blend as smoothly as we’d like. Our City is a place to which all nations come. They arrive with hope in their hearts, big dreams, and great ideas. Some come here to learn. Some come here for justice. And as these people and nations stream across our bridges and onto our streets, we find ourselves living in a microcosm of the City of God, though we are not actually (or ever will be) The City of God.

For the City of God (as described in Revelation) is a welcoming place whose gates will never be shut. No lines for passport approval. No Homeland Security or TSA. No need for police or armed guards to protect the population. All nations will go there and be welcomed. All people will call this City home. This is the antithesis of every country’s border and immigration policy; it is the primal example of an open-door policy. And beyond the entry, there is no need for police or weapons or other protection within the City. This is the peaceable kingdom. It isn’t divided into neighborhoods and ghettos for each cultural group; it isn’t a network of different Cities and states wherein like people live with other like people. God’s kingdom is one City wherein everyone lives together. All divisions were destroyed. All potential threats and troubles were destroyed – “nothing accursed may be found there” – so people may live in peace. (It’s beginning to sound like a real estate brochure whose marketing language makes everyone dream of living there… the perfect place to raise your family. All the neighbors are friendly. This place is move-in ready with all the amenities you’ll ever need.)

But this great, blessed City does not exist for the sake of looking good. It is not just a showcase house, doomed to remain empty. People will live here. Even better, people will want to be here. All people and all nations will stream through these city gates because they want to be with God. “People will come from north and south and east and west”[[1]](#footnote-1) because “there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism which binds us all together. One God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

On this Memorial Day weekend, one thing really caught my attention. Here is this glorious City of God wherein all people of creation – from every time and place – will live peaceably together (which in itself is a miracle!). All of the bad, broken, sinful, and accursed things were destroyed; only goodness exists in this city. So when people stream through the gates, they won’t bring their prejudice and stereotypes and fears and frustrations. Instead, they will bring the honor and glory of the nations. People and nations will bring the best of what they are, the best of what they’ve done for the kingdom of God. This brings to mind a cavernous trophy room full of the world’s good works and good news. Instead of a daily newspaper that begins with one shocking headline after another, this city will promote the heroes (famous and unsung), the projects (large and small) which have worked together through time to testify to God’s kingdom come.

We will hear the story of U.S. Colonel Halvorsen who organized airlifts of candy and small treats for German children trapped in the Soviet blockade of West Berlin. Col. Halvorsen (who is still alive) is affectionately known as the Berlin Candy Bomber.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We will hear the story of U.S. Sgt. Stubby, a stray dog credited with saving countless lives in World War I.[[4]](#footnote-4) Sgt. Stubby is the most decorated animal in American military history.

We will hear the story of Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who became an Underground Railroad conductor. Tubman guided hundreds of people out of slavery in the United States. She then worked with the Union Army during the Civil War, rescuing more than 700 people from slavery in the midst of that terrible war. Tubman’s life has certainly become a piece of our nation’s honor and glory.

 A mural of Tubman was finished this week at the Harriet Tubman Museum in Cambridge, Maryland. Painter, Michael Rosato, depicted a larger-than-life image of Harriet Tubman on an exterior wall. Her hand reaches out through the bricks to help the next person in need. She has a look of authority; people can trust that she knows what she’s doing. She has a look of compassion and determination; people believe that she wants to help and will help. One hand and foot are on the brick landscape, while the other hand and foot are planted on the riverbank behind Tubman; she is present now, but she is going somewhere soon. The invitation is clear: come. Whoever you are, whatever you dare and dream, come. She is a picture of welcome and promise.

 If Revelation is the real estate brochure for the City of God, this picture of Tubman could be on the cover. The picture wouldn’t be of Harriet Tubman, though; this is the very picture of God: a hardworking, authoritative, compassionate, determined God determined to save us from whatever troubles the world brings. God reaches out to invite us to a safe place, a better place, a new home. One hand and one foot of God Immanuel are on the ground with us here and now, while one hand and one foot are planted in this new City. The invitation is clear: Come. Whoever you are, wherever you’ve been, come. It is a picture of welcome and promise.

May we be ready to reach out and take God’s hand, journeying to the eternal city. May we exemplify God’s welcome for all in our everyday living, helping and sharing our goodness with all those around us regardless of race or culture or language or political affiliation. And may we look forward to that day and time and place when we will enter the City of God with great joy. Amen.

1. Luke 13:29 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ephesians 4:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail_Halvorsen> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.lowellmilkencenter.org/programs/projects/view/the-most-decorated-animal-in-american-military-history> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)