

Revelation 21:1-8

Title: The New City, or Omega to Alpha

Sitting here reading Revelation together this morning, we know that John of Patmos had no idea that 250 years after he wrote this letter, it would end up in a book called the Bible and that it, together with Genesis, parts of which were written over 1100 years earlier, would bookend all of Christian scripture. But the way John's letter ends could not be a more fitting conclusion than if he and the Yahwist source of the Pentateuch sat down together and planned it.

These ending chapters represent sort of an epilogue in the story of Revelation. They are the ending of this rather strange and mysterious book, and they represent the ending of the story of the printed Bible.

But the ending of Revelation is really a whole new beginning of a story that is still being written. John utilizes the image of a "new holy city," of a "new Jerusalem" to describe this new beginning, and as someone who has grown quite fond of living in the country, I notice a few things about John's imagery. First, it is not a beautiful countryside or a peaceful beach or the idyllic Elysian fields of the Greeks. Rather, this final place of God and people together is a city, teeming with people and homes and businesses and entertainment.

It is also **not** a heavenly city, but rather a city that comes out of heaven and is found on earth. So much as we sometimes imagine a heavenly city paved with streets of gold and angels playing harps, the vision John offers is rather that of a big, and very inclusive, metropolitan area here on earth where God and people dwell together in harmony. John makes a point of saying this city includes **all** of God's children, from **all** the nations.

But John also has a few things to say about the water in this new city. And since our retreat theme is living waters, let's look at what John says here. To begin with, in this new city, "the sea will be no more." And while water is necessary to life, and is often a sign of the holy in scripture, water in the Bible can also be quite dangerous and scary.

Remember in Genesis 1 where God places a dome, called the sky, over the earth to protect the earth from the chaotic waters above. Remember in Noah's time when the chaotic waters are unleashed to destroy the world. Remember the Red Sea, which forms a barrier for the Israelite people that is as formidable as the Egyptian army. God uses water as an implement of war that destroys an army. Remember the gospel stories where the storms on the sea represent danger and potential death for the disciples.

Even earlier in Revelation, the sea is a threatening place that must be endured or conquered (4:6). And in chapter 13, the sea is that place

from which the beast arises (13:1), a beast that threatens all of humanity.

But here in the culmination of John's vision, those destructive waters are no more. They are instead replaced with the waters of life, flowing through the middle of the city. Those waters nurture the tree of life, bearing 12 different kinds of fruit (meaning that it provides food year round), and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

So think about this image John gives us, because it is truly amazing. John doesn't suggest that the fulfillment of God's vision for the earth is somehow escapist, with the faithful running away to heaven while everyone else suffers. John also doesn't suggest that paradise for us will somehow just be us and the people who look and think and act like us, the people who agree with us. Instead, to be quite honest, John paints a picture of paradise that I think would make a lot of Christians uncomfortable, maybe not even want to end up there.

Because paradise is not an escape from this world – it is a transformation of the people living in this world, and that includes us. The dangerous waters of Genesis become the life-giving, healing waters of the new city. Adam and Eve separation from God was brought on by the fruit of a tree, but now it is a tree that provides life to the people of the city. I also notice that John only mentions two of those trees – one on either side of the river. Which means there isn't one of those trees

inside each of our private, fenced in backyards where we have permission to shoot our neighbor if he tries to sneak onto our property and steal a coconut, or whatever the fruit of the month is.

So that means that in this new city, we have to share something held in common. Also gone are the borders and fences and walls that keep us separated from one another. This city might even have Democrats and Republicans in it, maybe even Trump and Hillary supporters. Even worse, it may have Canadians and Socialists and Communists and Syrians and Mexicans and French and Chinese and Russians and Somalians and Cubans and gay people and welfare recipients along with the obscenely wealthy, and maybe, if we're lucky, this new city might even include us.

Because God is, and has always been, about transforming us into something new. That is what resurrection is. New life out of the old. New beginnings and new hopes and new possibilities, not just in some far off future, but today and every day. So as we wrap up reading Revelation here, and we end with this vision of the new city of God, I'm left wondering not what do I need to do to make it to paradise. But rather, if I, if we, know what paradise looks like, why aren't we doing all we can to make that happen here and happen now?