

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“It’s A Long Journey”

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Revelation 22:1-5

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All morning we have been hearing some of the final words of the final vision of the final book of the Bible. It’s a magnificent vision, unparalleled in the Bible and surely unrivaled in its beauty. A new city with gates made from a single pearl, but which apparently don’t work. They are stuck open. Streets made of pure gold. A river flowing from the throne of God right through the middle of the city, flanked by the Tree of Life bearing 12 kinds of fruit each in its month. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. If the leaves of the tree heal the nations, how sweet must the fruit be? The Bible ends on a beautiful chord of many notes: celebratory, exuberant, settled, peaceful, holy. If you wondered what the world is coming to, this is the Bible’s answer.

Even with the beautiful scene at the end, Revelation is hard to get our minds around. There’s a creature in chapter 4 with eyes in the back of his head. There’s a holy trinity and a beast, a dragon, and an antichrist. There are scrolls and bowls and all sorts of numbers that seem to mean more than simply for counting. And then here is this vision—a city with no temple because God is the Temple, and no sun or moon because God is the Light and there’s never any night. And the gates are never shut and the River of Life quenches those who thirst and the people see God’s face—like no one else before them. And the jewels on the wall—did I mention the jewels? What does all of it mean? I’m not exactly, precisely sure about all of it. Like I said, “it is a hard book to get your mind around.”

There’s scary stuff in it and wonderful stuff too, and all of it is hard to get our minds around. My guess is that John, when he wrote this, was doing his best to get his mind and his words around what he was seeing in his vision. If a picture is worth a thousand words, John was using words to describe pictures beyond description.

He could have just described the physical world he knew and experienced: this island on which I’m exiled is very lonely and scary and I don’t know if I’ll make it off this rock. I’m worried about my family and friends back in Asia Minor who are being hounded because of their faith. And I’m worried about all the churches because the reports are that it’s getting worse out there. I’m worried for the whole world as Domitian has come to the throne in Rome. None of the Caesars are benevolent, but this one is the worst of all. He thinks he’s a god. He really does. And he wants us all to think that too. But I can’t do that. We can’t do that. We won’t. And so the brothers and sisters are dying. These are hard days, but I still have to believe that a better day is coming Lord, when You make the world right, like its supposed to be; when You reign as You should and when all Your enemies are cast out.

John could have written it that way. But he had a vision that this material world isn't all there is. What you can see with your eyes and feel with your hands is not the only reality that is real. We would do well to remember that more often. Too often we too see the world only as it appears to be to our basic senses.

Every once in a while someone comes along who, when they describe what they see it's like they see a deeper truth. It's like they see a different world, a spiritual world all around them. It's like they see something in us that we can't see in ourselves.

In the Christian way of understanding things, this spiritual vision does not come cheaply. It doesn't come to a person who is just eccentric or who lights a few candles. It's hard work to become a mystic and to have the eyes of God. It's a journey that begins right where you are. It begins with a cleansing of your self and soul from the external things that keep you from God (like sin of various kinds), and the internal things that keep you from God (like your distractions and desires to pursue other things rather than God). This purgation is a grace made possible by Christ and is usually intertwined with, and followed by a phase called illumination. The Holy Spirit deepens your understanding of the world and of scripture. You read scripture not just as an historical or doctrinal document, but one that is your own story. You begin to see the depth of the experiences all around you as not just in the physical realm, but you are given the grace to see God's presence all around and in the depths of everything. You have to go through purgation to come to illumination because all the junk in our lives blinds our spiritual eyes and weighs down our hearts. We have to shed as much of that as possible, so that we are free to see God. In the beginning of Revelation, John had a vision of a door open to heaven and a voice, "Come on in and see." If we are to have such vision, we have to have eyes that can see clearly and ears that are not filled with all the noise of this world. With eyes and ears of God we are free to begin seeing the world as God sees it.

Like the title of the beautiful oboe piece just played, it's a long journey to get there. You don't just start at the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1, and jump straight to the Tree of Life in the heavenly city of Revelation 22. It's a long journey here from Adam and Eve, two simple creatures learning to eat and talk and love and disobey way back there in the beginning. It's a long journey from one man, Abraham, who left his home and family to go to the place God promised him. It's a long journey from the years of slavery in Egypt where the people suffered until Moses delivered them through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. It's a long journey from David and Solomon and the kings and Isaiah and Ezekiel, and the prophets in the good times and bad. It's a long journey. It's a long journey from Bethlehem and Galilee and Calvary, and a stone rolled away, and from Damascus and Corinth and Rome, and a church born. It's a long journey.

It may have been a long journey for you too to be here today. You could tell stories of your trials and struggles, the temptations within you and the problems around you and how you caused some of them and solved some of them and still endure some of them. You could tell a story about a journey. If you live long

enough, you'll have trouble in life. There will be dark days. I've never known anyone who didn't have some. And I've known people who had more than their fair share, more than they deserved, more than they brought on themselves. But some of those people had a clear vision about the world. That vision was a gift.

Poets are like that. They see and help us see a world around us in the world we usually only see. In thinking about the Tree of Life in the city, I remembered a Wendell Berry poem about trees.

To sit and look at light-filled leaves
May let us see, or seem to see,
Far backward as through clearer eyes
To what unsighted hope believes:
The blessed conviviality
That sang Creation's seventh sunrise,
Time when the Maker's radiant sight
Made radiant everything He saw,
And everything He saw was filled
With perfect joy, and life and light.

My poem would be:

I sit under this big ol' tree.
Its bark is brown, its leaves are green.
It gives me shade, it gives me fruit.
If the squirrels get in it again, I'm going to shoot ('em).

His poem is not only about the tree whose bark and leaves anyone can see and possibly describe: brown, green, big, small. But he also sees a deeper truth: he is in the moment open to the wonder of the beauty and meaning of the tree as God might have enjoyed the Tree of Life on the day when God said, "It is good. It is all good." So there's the eyes with which we see the world. There's a spiritual vision. And then there's the glimpse of seeing the world the way God might see the world. When we start seeing with those sorts of eyes; time expands and space contracts. I decrease and He increases. With God's eyes, everything is filled with perfect joy and life and light.

God's vision hasn't changed even as the world has changed. The Tree of Life is in the beginning and the end. The Light of the World is in the beginning and the end. The River of Life, the Bread of Life, the presence of God are in the beginning and at the end. Even in some dark times, in between the beginning and end, the people who see God's vision hold out hope for better days. Christians are supposed to be those kinds of people who remember the world is created, sustained, and redeemed by God.

We are supposed to be the people for whom despair is not in our vocabulary. Sadness, fear maybe, concern, trouble, trepidation, grief; these may be in our vocabulary; but despair is not allowed. That doesn't mean we are naïve or insulated and isolated from the world as it is. Christians should never be so full and busy with being Christians that we close our gates to the world around us.

We are to be like Ezekiel, who held out hope to his people in captivity in Babylon that one day the dry bones would live again. And like Isaiah, who pictured the day Jerusalem would not weep anymore. And like Jesus who, when He learned of the death of His friend Lazarus, wept, and also said, "this was meant for God's glory." And who even on the cross said, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

The Bible has a wide-eyed hope for the future and a clear-eyed understanding of the present. Sometimes Christians don't have enough of either.

The journey begins with purgation, a cleansing of the soul and actions. It continues by grace through illumination, as the Spirit begins to open the mind and soul to the depths of God's mystery. The third phase, as it is called, of this journey is called contemplation, which is the experience of being united with God.

DaySpring calls ourselves a church in the contemplative tradition. Sometimes that's kind of a confusing phrase to people, especially people who wonder if they are supposed to be something they aren't in order to be here, and be DaySpringy. What does it mean to be contemplative Christians? Bottom line is that this is about a journey to being the kinds of people who experience God as we were created to experience and have union with God. What we do to be on that journey is we try to pray with listening ears and hearts, and read scripture carefully, seeking deep truth in ancient words. That's what we mean by being contemplative. It doesn't mean contemplate like you are thinking about something, though it can involve heavy thinking, it's not just about the mind. It's not how smart you are about God. John didn't get the point where we could walk through the door of heaven only by his studies or by his labor, or by his goodness or his articulate writing. He received the vision by the grace of God and was the sort of person who by his studies and prayer and devotion to God was ready to receive it when it came.

That doesn't mean that you'll get this sort of vision. But it does mean that if you are open, you'll see the world through spiritual eyes. You'll see the hurt in a person who is short with you; you'll hear the voice that whispers, "you should call her. You haven't talked with her in a long time and she needs you." You'll see the big picture and the little details. You'll have God's eyes, and what you'll see is that the spiritual world and the physical world aren't so far apart after all.

It's a life journey. To call what we do in worship or prayer, or anything else in any sense contemplative, is really a hope and intention about having and experiencing a union with God, which is as much about the heart as the head, as much about resting in God as working to get there. Very often in worship and in

contemplative prayer, and in the way we read scripture, and in not scheduling too many programs and such, we are trying to get out of the way of ourselves to make space in our lives to encounter and walk with God. This experience of union with God varies person to person, but it is almost about deeply uniting, or reuniting with Divine Love.

When you get to the end, you find love, the same love that saved you in the beginning by grace, the same love that sustained you and lifted you up, and saw you through some rough spots and stayed true to you—it's Love. It's always Love. The same apostle who saw this vision of the new creation and new city, also wrote, "God is Love and he who abides in Love abides in Me." And he wrote, "For God so loved the world He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." And also, "Greater love has no one than this: that you lay down your life for your friends."

So in every footprint you leave on this spiritual journey, may there be a drop of love that each of us may someday, somehow, be the people of whom it is said—"they saw the face of God."