

# GOD'S DREAM

Revelation 21:10, 22–27; 22:1–5; Sixth Sunday of Easter, c

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*Prayer: Amid all the changing words of our generation, O God, may we hear your eternal word that does not change. May our hearts and minds be opened to know the things that matter to you, and that bring love and compassion and community to the world that you love so dearly. In the name of the one who embodied perfect love, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

One would think that when Mother's Day falls on the same day as Confirmation Sunday, the preacher could find a nice little scripture verse on love and go with that. There's certainly no shortage of verses. The Old Testament speaks of love more than we sometimes realize. Jesus talked of love incessantly. The Apostle Paul, often thought to be so rigid, wrote one of the most poignant and beautiful texts ever written on love: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." And at our baptism just a little while ago, we heard the writer from the Epistle of John: "See what love God has given us that we should be called children of God." Fits right into Mother's Day and Confirmation Sunday.

So it might surprise some of you that the scripture I have chosen today is the lectionary text from the book of Revelation. Go figure.

Part of the problem we have with reading the book of Revelation is that we have been indoctrinated by so much of our fundamentalist culture into believing that the book is a prediction of the future, a detailed and literal setting forth of that which will someday happen. After all, millions of dollars have been made on the "Left Behind" series which caters to that notion (and truth be told, is hardly biblical at all!).

I would rather suggest that Revelation might be compared to a music video. You've seen them on TV, haven't you? The artist or group sings, and while they do that the screen is filled with images and symbols which fade in and out and are sometimes even superimposed upon one another. There really isn't a story line as such, rather, the point is for the viewer to be grasped by the montage of images.

That's the way Revelation works. It throws images at us, symbols, pictures. They fade in and out, they are layered one on top of the other. They don't so much tell a story, but they create an impression. The book is not intended as a photograph might be. It is rather like an impressionistic painting.

And towards the very end of the book, John, the author of the book has a message he wants to communicate very clearly: God is creating the new Jerusalem, the perfect city. The gold and jewels speak of its splendor. There are 12 gates, which call to mind the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles—all of whom are part of God's city. But get this! *All other people and nations are*

*welcome*, for the 12 gates swing wide to the world. Perhaps, best of all, within the city there is a tree with leaves for the healing of nations.

Now here's the part that will interest our young people: There is no temple in the city. No church! I remember one time at another church having a little workshop with children who were in the first grade and taking communion for the first time. I asked them to draw a picture of something in the church we celebrate and to tell how it makes us feel when we do.

Many of the pictures had Christmas scenes, or Easter, or communion drawings. One boy held up a picture of a minister with his hands raised in the air. "This is the preacher saying the benediction," he said. And I thought, "Ah, how wonderful. He understands the nature of the trinity and the charge to go forth into the world with joy and peace." But he continued, "A lot of stuff in church is boring so it is something to celebrate when it's over." Well, in a way, that bright young man has a vision of the Holy City.

In the Holy City of God, there is no need for organized religion, for God is in the midst of the people.

Well, hopefully you get the drift. This is an impressionistic picture of John's understanding of what God dreams for us and for our world.

Notice what John's picture of God's dream is NOT: It is not some idyllic setting in which an individual is far removed from the activity and the crowd of the city. John's vision of the ultimate destiny of humanity is an urban vision. John sees that God's dream is of human beings living in community, witnessing to their faith and finding God's presence in the complexities of social, economic and political life.

John's vision is not of a faithful few who have been separated from the rest of the world's inhabitants. His is a vision of vast dimensions which encompasses nations and peoples of every race and persuasion.

John's vision is not of "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by" when we die, but of God's goodness and love become so real to us that we are drawn to one another as brothers and sisters to live in community characterized by justice and harmony. God's dream is of people committed not to our own individual goals and ambitions, but to the common good.

Now, being in heart of the city, we all know that we are far from that dream. Think of a city these days and we think of decaying neighborhoods and homeless people and crime and hunger and poverty and despair. Far from the common good. But God dreams of a city and world in which there are no homeless or hungry and in which the politics of self-interest and power or just plain indifference do not decide the life and death of those who are starving.

So the question for us is: What can we do? What should we do? There are different answers that folks have had to that question.

Some say we are supposed to fix what is wrong with the world. This is what my generation was taught. We can bring in the Kingdom of Heaven, if only we work hard enough at it. We can fix the city and make it more like the City of God. And there is certainly a strong role for us to play in alleviating all of these problems. Jesus looked over the city and wept because the people in the city did not know the things that make for peace. Churches have done wonders in helping to bring civil and human rights to those who have been denied them, and compassionate ministries which help the least of these. But it takes more than just human efforts, or an act of Congress, or the stroke of a presidential pen.

Some others have said that the problem is a spiritual one. Fix the heart of the individual and individuals will fix the social ills. But this is unrealistically optimistic about human potential. Many manage to be fiercely spiritual while the ills of our world multiply at an exponential pace.

And there are those who simply choose despair. People throw up their hands at the intractability of the problems and retreat into cocoons of indifference.

So what are we to do? And what does this strange passage from Revelation have to say to us?

John shares with us a vision of God's dream here—God's dream of the Holy City, which God is bringing among us. We are challenged by this text neither to fix all that is wrong with the community nor to build an ideal world. This text simply challenges us to have faith in God's dream. It challenges us to believe that, one day, God in Christ will meet history's weariness with heavenly renewal, its sin with redemption, its wounds with healing, its frustrations with victory, its death with life everlasting.

Today a number of our youth will reaffirm the vows of their baptism and profess their faith in Jesus Christ. In a very real sense all of us reaffirm this faith every Sunday. Part of what it means to be a person of faith is to believe that God is at work among us, doing more with us and with our world than we can imagine. To be a person of faith means to believe in God. And if we do, we share God's dream. And if we share God's dream, we never give up on the hope that one day there will be a human community in which, through God's power to heal, there will be no more hunger, or racism, or injustice, or despair.

To be a person of faith does not mean that we think we can feed every starving person in the world. It means we believe God dreams of a world without hunger, and that we share in the fulfillment of the dream as we respond to the hungry of our own city.

To be a person of faith does not mean that we will ever conquer injustice. It means we believe God dreams of a world in which men and women, boys and girls, of every nation and race live in mutual respect and harmony, and that we share in the fulfillment of that dream as we practice the love and hospitality of Jesus Christ in our relationships with people in our daily contacts.

But enough from me. Hear the words from the faith statements from some of our young people who are being confirmed this morning. Notice how they have caught a vision of God's dream:

“God is many things, but primarily God is love. God forgives everyone, even when forgiveness doesn’t seem deserved.”

“Jesus is a teacher. He teaches every day even though it might not seem like it. So don’t put yourself down when you do something that you regret because come to think of it, that could be one of his teaching lessons.”

“Jesus rejoices with me when I’m happy. He grieves with me when I’m sad. He sits beside me when I’m sick. He pulls me up when I’ve lost my strength. Having lived on earth as human, he understands everything and knows what I’ve been through.”

“The Holy Spirit is ... God’s presence in and around all of us. The Spirit protects me and everyone around me and gives us life. The Spirit not only connects me to every other person in the world, but is also my connection to God and Jesus Christ. The Spirit is with us, even when we don’t know it.”

“The Holy Spirit is like the world’s lifeline because the Spirit keeps us together and alive. The Holy Spirit is every human’s breath, and is also the ember that keeps us strong and warm.”

“I believe the community of the church is like the Trinity. We all do things in different ways, but ultimately there is one common theme, and that is to serve, love, care for, and express our beliefs and the amazing love of God.”

“The church is a holy place, not because of a gorgeous exterior but because of all the loving souls held within who love worshipping God and serving others. Not one kind of person is welcome, but everyone is welcome within the house of the Lord. Everyone can come together to make a beautiful puzzle of faith: God brings you in, Jesus teaches you the way, and the Holy Spirit keeps us together.”

It sounds like some young people I know “get it.” They know that because we are humans we can never create the perfect world. But they know that because we are people of faith we cannot retreat from the problems of the world. They profess their faith that God can establish the community which God dreams. And they understand the call for us to believe in what God can do with and through those who dare to share God’s dream.

May we learn from them.

Amen.

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### **Revelation 21:10, 22–27 NRSV**

**10** And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

**22** I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. **25** Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

### **Revelation 22:1–5**

**1** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. **3** Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; **4** they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.