

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Zechariah 8.1-8; Revelation 21.10, 21.22-22.5; John 14.1-4

“Our Vision of Hope”

Prayer: Sometimes our vision gets stuck in the mire of this world, dear God. And we find it difficult to rise into the heavens, into your presence, and hold tightly to the hope that you offer. Many things and events and people tear us down, day after day, so that our hope in you becomes tattered and frayed along the edges. Refresh us, we pray. Draw us into your presence and allow us to experience your beauty. Relieve our tired hearts and minds of the raggedness of life. Allow us, by being in your presence, to have our spirits revived and our vision restored. As you speak to us this morning, move powerfully throughout us, healing us of the wounds that life brings to us. Lift our eyes to your throne and to your Lamb so that we may have the strength we need for the journey you lead us on. Amen.

We don't like to think about it, but every manner of violence and war, rages in tiny hamlets and towns, all around the world. Even now, as we sit quietly, peacefully, here in this serene setting, worshipping our God, there are people shrieking in pain and trembling in terror somewhere in the world.

I find it difficult to get my head around this reality because it's not my experience. And yet, no matter how difficult my naïve little brain struggles with it all; no matter how unreal the daily suffering that many people in the world endure; no matter how much I try not to think about such things – they continue, and there is very little that we can do to stop it all.

John's world is even more violent than our own. The Romans rule ruthlessly. They keep the peace through fear. This culture of violence is woven throughout Roman society.

People survive by tirelessly subverting their neighbor. If we could enter John's time, we would be shocked at the level of brutality that we would witness and experience on a daily basis.

John's friends, the people in these new churches, suffer because they listen to John and they follow Jesus. There really is no way for John to make sense of this mass pain that surrounds the Christians. There is no way to alleviate it.

So, John paints a picture of hope for the people he loves. He creates images that they may hang on to, especially when they're in the middle of great suffering.

As we consider John's vision this morning, I urge you to close your eyes for a few minutes and let's see if our own imaginations are strong enough to create the image that John is painting. Go ahead, close them. If you fall asleep, that's ok, it only means that you're tired.

John begins with the holy city -- Jerusalem -- a place that most of the Christians in Asia minor have never visited -- as the backdrop to his vision.

He says, someday, someday God will fully establish a holy, mythic, new Jerusalem, a Valhalla like place -- a city unlike any city you've ever known.

"Imagine it, my friends, imagine it. There isn't a temple to some absent, malicious god in the middle of this holy, new Jerusalem, where everyone is forced to pay taxes and give their worship even though it all feels like a sham. It isn't like the cities with the temples to Caesar, or to the fertility gods, or the tall towers to commerce, in which you live right now.

"In the center of the holy, new Jerusalem, God himself, along with his sacrificed Lamb Son, lives and dwells and have their being." Can you see it?

"Everyone in the city sees them. Everyone gazes upon their beauty. Everyone is moved to tears by the exquisiteness of being so near the one true God. And no one is forced to die as a sacrifice to the one true God. No one is forced to pay taxes to the one true God. No one is a slave to the one true God. No one is dragged into war by the one true God.

"And in the holy Jerusalem, no one is afraid of what happens in the dark -- the way we're afraid of those who lurk in the dark of our present cities -- because there is no darkness in the holy city. No one is afraid of suffering from the heat because there is no scorching, hot sun. No one is afraid of foreign invaders riding through and pillaging and raping and destroying because all of the nations and their kings are equally drawn to the peace and tranquility of the city. No one is afraid that any nation is greater than another because every nation brings its greatest and best gifts into the holy city."

Do you see it? A city filled with diverse looking and sounding smelling people. Do you see it? Children safely playing in the street. Elders sitting in chairs watching the children laugh and run. Women standing together and talking and laughing. Men thumping one another, and loudly poking at each other, while shrieking with laughter. Do you see it?

“And there isn’t anything impure in the city, the way we’re surrounded and consumed by impurity in our cities right now. There isn’t anything that is base, or shameful, or disgusting, or perverse, or twisted, or broken, or dishonest. There isn’t any need for soldiers or generals. All of your children, all of your elderly, all of your women, all of your sick and lame, and all of your men, are safe. And only peaceful loving people who are like you dwell there. Everyone else remains outside of the holy city.”

Can you see it? Can you feel it? Is John’s image of shalom growing for you? In the face of all that is wrong in this world, there exists another world that is its polar opposite. Is a feeling for that reality growing within you? It sounds like a fairy tale but it’s not.

John continues, “In the middle of it all there’s a river. A life giving river. A river like the one in Psalm 1, next to which people live and thrive and grow and prosper. A river that doesn’t rush past its banks and destroy people and homes and property. It’s a river that flows directly through the heart of the holy city and provides refreshing, cool water, day after day, year after year. Sparkling, clear, clean, life giving water, that flows from God and the Lamb.

The trees that are planted beside the river offer food all year long, without anyone having to toil, or sweat, or fight the thistles. And the leaves of the trees powerfully heal anything that makes people sick, because in the new Jerusalem, in the holy city, the curse is removed. The holy city is Eden restored.

And there, at that place, God is watching us -- as we’re watching God. We walk and talk with God in the cool of the shade of the trees, beside the beautiful, refreshing river. And we are not afraid. We are filled with joy being so close to God.

In that city, we all carry the mark of the Lord God on our foreheads, a mark given to us in baptism, and not the ugly debased marks of the rulers of the nations who scar us and brand us so they may torture and enslave us.

In that city there’s no night. There’s nothing to fear. There’s nothing from which to hide. There aren’t any shadows to avoid. For the righteous Lord illumines every corner of the city, equally brightly.”

Now, as we experience this exquisite vision, we understand that John isn’t trying to paint a picture of exact reality. He isn’t speaking in literal terms. Instead, he takes what he knows and draws a contrast. All of the things that are wrong within John’s world are removed so that the next world is just the opposite.

I've said before that it's proper to imagine heaven in any way that you wish. Create a picture of great beauty and comfort and tranquility and love, and declare that to be what heaven is like.

For me, heaven will look like our back deck on a beautiful summer evening, as the heat of the day begins to dissipate, and I'm sitting there around the table with our family and friends, eating wonderful food, laughing and drinking. And I will declare, "It's another glorious night in Northeast Ohio. That's my vision of heaven.

And sitting there with us is the lamb of God. Sitting there with us is the Lord Jesus. And he too is eating and drinking.

The only thing that we all must include in our visions is the presence of the Lord God and the Lamb at the center. Everything that we imagine about heaven is valid as long as it revolves around the peaceful, immediate presence of God and his Lamb.

No one is subjugated to the cheap seats where the Lamb is only seen on the jumbotron. We all may see his eyes and hear his voice and we may touch his hands, and be touched by his hands. That's shalom.

We are a people who have hope that the suffering and fear of this world is not all that there is. We are a people who trust that our God will eventually make all things new. We are a people who believe that there is a time and place where we will all exist in the glorious, peace-filled, comfort of our God.

And the truth is, we don't know what this literally means. Theologians and preachers have attempted to draw literal conclusions about heaven since the beginning of time. But we don't know. They don't know.

We only know that heaven is the place where God is, and where God's will is perfectly implemented, and where evil no longer exists. Heaven is where the lamb lives. Heaven is the opposite of the pain and suffering of what we have here in this world. And it's the intensifying of the good things that we already know and experience.

We may mourn for those who suffer in this world. And we should work to eliminate suffering and oppression as much as we're able. We're called to be people of grace. People who bring the presence of God, the love of God, the peace of God, the grace of God -- already, right now -- into the presence of the people who surround us.

But we're also people who look beyond anything that we may accomplish and we envision the loving presence of God fully developed. That reality is what we long for.

I've been surprised to discover that the older I get, the greater the longing becomes. The longer that we live in this world, the more that we see in this world, even

the beautiful things, the more we desire the beauty of perfection that's found in the will of God. The longer we wait, the more certain we are that there must be more to come, and the greater our hope becomes.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.