

**A Holy City**  
**Revelation 21:1-6 | Dan McCoig | 2 May 2010**

1.

Winchester really rolls out the red carpet each Apple Blossom Festival. We know how to put our best foot forward as we share our grand and wonderful town with more than 200,000 guests.

In the 20 years that I have lived in the valley, 15 of them in Winchester, I have discovered that people either are passionate about the festival or are less than enthusiastic about it.

Putting a lot of people in a small space can result in challenges.

Today's text talks about urban living.

But the city envisioned by John, the New Jerusalem. is unique.

It is a place of bliss, unparalleled.

There will be no more tears.

There will be no more death.

There will be no more pain.

John's words offer comfort and solace for the brokenhearted and demoralized.

But there are other things here in the text as well.

Consider the rich and under-explored imagery.

John is trying to give us a glimpse of paradise to come.

Notice first what is not there.

No fluffy clouds, no angels, no harps – things that are ordinarily associated with a heavenly paradise.

Now, notice what is there – a bustling urban area, a city.

The New Jerusalem.

2.

In 2004, the Chinese government announced a world exposition to be held in 2010 – that's this year -- in Shanghai, a city of 20 million persons.

Shanghai is expecting to host roughly 200 million visitors from nearly 100 countries.

The name of the exposition is "A Better City, A Better Life."

China has dedicated more than five square kilometers at the core of the city to exhibitions, events, and forums.

The hope of the exposition is "to build a powerful and lasting pilot example of sustainable and harmonious urban living."

The exposition has some interesting information on the history of cities.

For example, in 1800 only two percent of the global population lived in cities.

By 1950, 29 percent of the global population lived in cities.

By 2000, the percentage of the global population living in urban areas had risen to almost 50 percent.

Cities can be and are wonderful places.

It is where one out of two humans live.

World Expos have been around for more than 150 years.

The first one, then called a fair, was held in 1851 in London's Hyde Park.

Over the years host nations have created notable and iconic architecture to mark the exposition grounds; for example, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the unisphere in New York, and the Space Needle in Seattle.

World Expos have evolved.

For most of the first 100 years or so the expos focused upon industrialization with all of its attendant inventions and technology.

In the mid-1900s, the focus shifted from inventions and technology, that is goods, to cultural ideas.

They became noticeably more future-oriented, almost Utopian.

Today, expos seem to be a lot about national branding.

The host country wants to put its best foot forward about who they are and where they are headed.

It appears that this is true of Shanghai and its Better City, Better Life expo.

The exhibitors are also interested in national branding.

Consider for example the United States' pavilion at the expo.

It will be built around four themes: sustainability, teamwork, health, and the Chinese community in America.

Upon completion, the pavilion will look like, in the words of one critic, "an Asian-influenced rain forest-meets-city skyline-meets-rock concert.

3.

The Shanghai Expo, wittingly or unwittingly, envisions a city similar to the one envisioned by John in Revelation.

No pain, no tears, no enmity between peoples.

All beauty and light.

Let's describe John's vision of a holy city, the New Jerusalem.

According to John, the New Jerusalem will be:

Holy.

Intentional and lavish as a wedding day bride.

The abode of God.

Radiate with the presence of God.

Built from precious metals and gems.

Filled with cultural imports from all nations.

Daylight and never night.

Set in the middle of a garden.

John wants us to grasp how glorious the New Jerusalem will be.

It is heaven.

Scholars have long-noted how peculiar it is that John would select the city as an image for heaven.

It seems counterintuitive.

Cities are notorious for their busyness, their noise, their chaos, and regrettably their crime.

Cities certainly bring out the best in us.

But they can also bring out the worst in us.

4.

Why, I wonder, would God choose a city as the picture of paradise?

And, perhaps more importantly what might the implications of "the city as paradise" image be for the church today?

Quite frankly, I believe the more obvious vision God could have sent John would have been of a garden.

Given the recent rains, cool weather, and bright sunshine gardens are looking pretty heavenly right about now.

Humanity began in garden.

It is no wonder we are attracted to them.

It's like going home, returning to the womb.

Last year, in his book *Culture Making*, author Andy Crouch suggested a natural progression from garden to city.

He bases his case on what he calls a “cultural mandate” given by God to Adam and Eve in the Bible’s Book of Genesis.

God tells Adam and Eve to create and cultivate.

Humanity’s first parents are charged by God to order creation so that it can be fruitful.

Crouch surveys several Genesis texts to support his assertion.

In Genesis 1 and 2, God creates a world yet to be sin-tainted.

A paradise.

A peaceful, heavenly garden.

Adam and Eve are connected intimately with each other, with God and with their life purpose.

They are given a mandate to expand culture — to create and cultivate.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve give independence from God a try.

The results are world-altering.

They’re disconnected from God.

Their creation and cultivation are cursed and will now be frustrated.

They’re removed from paradise and banished from the garden.

In Genesis 11, there is misguided city-building – the Tower of Babel.

People are living out their cultural mandate but in human triumph and not divine worship; “us,” “we” and “ourselves” dominate the text.

Genesis starts in a perfect garden — with connection to God, connection to each other and a call to divinely inspired culture creating.

Ten chapters later, there’s aggressive independence from God and self-aggrandizing vocation in Babel.

Given this survey, a city starts to make real sense in Revelation 21.

The city is the redemption of Babel and Eden.

There’s dense human interconnectedness once again.

The restored presence of the Lord is in its center.

Created goods — “the glory and honor of the nations” — are pouring into it as evidence of the goodness of human creation and cultivation.

It’s a much better city and a much better life than Genesis 3 through the end of human history could ever imagine.

5.

We are now at the “so what?” point of the sermon.

Granted, envisioning heaven as a garden would surely have honored God for his redemption and creative beauty.

Everything will be restored to the way the Maker intended it.

But, consider this, envisioning heaven as a city honors *us*, as well.

It’s God’s way of saying that the human project still is “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31, emphasis added).

God is saying that what we create can be good.

Things are moving ahead to what is new and not just back to what was old.

And we partner with God in ushering in that way.

Allow me to humbly suggest several ways to apply these ideas:

First, God’s “cultural mandate” still holds today.

We’re still charged with creating and cultivating.

Our jobs and our free-time pursuits are city-building.

We’re to add to the glory and honor of the nations.

We please God by making beautiful art.

Organizing complex data into understandable reports.

Framing a house.

Teaching our daughter to dress herself and tie her shoes.

Teaching others.

As we order the world around us, we contribute to the New Jerusalem.

General Maximus applied Revelation 21 well in **The Gladiator**: “Brothers ... what we do in life echoes in eternity.”

Second, if heaven looks like a redeemed city, and Christ-followers are to pursue God’s will on earth as it is in heaven, then how are we to be redeeming our cities now?

It’s a great question that our small groups, mission teams and leadership committees should reflect on.

How can First Presbyterian Church serve our city well?

Or better than discussing that, we could follow the example of one Denver church plant that decided to go and ask its city.

The church’s leadership community broke into pairs and went to a crowded park near the church with a question, not an answer: “How could a church in your neighborhood best serve you, regardless of whether you ever wanted to visit it or not?”

People were refreshingly taken aback, and answers ranged from community child care to organizing block parties to opening the doors for community meetings.

But one man’s cynical answer was more informative than any other: “They could leave the neighborhood.”

That’s the answer the church’s leadership team took most to heart. They developed a vision of being the church that *everyone* would miss if it ever left the neighborhood.

How could First Presbyterian Church transform Winchester?

How can we become the church that nobody ever wants to leave the neighborhood?

Finally, we should view ourselves as the new city.

We are the people — the locations — that can exhibit the presence of God and deeper human interconnectedness.

In his book *The Good, Great Place*, author Ray Oldenburg argues that by suburbanizing, America has lost its value on locations that promote a casual, public life: cafés, bookstores, pubs, the bygone soda foundation, etc.

He calls these types of environments a “third place,” meaning environments that “host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”

Think of Norm walking into *Cheers*, the *Friends* gathering at Central Perk or your grandma and the bridge club spending all day at the hair salon together.

Starbucks was so impressed with the “third place” idea that it made it a corporate mission to become a third place for us all.

After home and work, each local store wants to be the place where we hang out with each other.

6.

So what kind of impact could committed Christians have on their too-busy and too-isolated neighbors by becoming third placers?

We should be regulars in places where nonbelievers congregate: the neighborhood bar, coffee shop, the gym, etc.

Our family rooms and our back yards can become a third place for people around us.

Oldenburg says we’ll have better cities and better lives if we re-establish these types of third places.

Jesus would probably agree.

We can join him in redeeming the city by more actively engaging it with our relational presence.

Amen.