

May 22, 2022 Easter 6C

Rev. 21:9-14, 21-27

The Choice of Making a Difference

Intro: There's an old joke about heaven that goes like this:

A rich man on his deathbed prayed to be allowed to take his wealth with him into heaven. An angel appears during his prayers and makes a deal to be allowed to bring one suitcase with him into the afterlife. Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars and places it beside his bed. When he dies and shows up at the gates of heaven, St. Peter stops him and says, "You can't bring that in here."

The man tells him he has a deal with God that says he can and once St. Peter checks his records he says: "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through." St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, "You brought pavement?"

The pavement joke is really insightful if we'll take a moment to look more closely at it instead of laughing it off. The joke is telling us that what we treasure here is not what is treasured in heaven.

In our Revelation reading today, John gets a picture of the new heaven. An Angel says to John, "*Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.*" That is the only spoken sentence in this whole reading. We have been looking at some of the choices of Easter these past few weeks. We have looked at the choice of love, the choice of peace, the choice of working. Today we look at one more Easter choice. But we have to look closely. It is hidden in all the symbolism of our readings. But let's start with that one sentence spoken out-loud in our reading. "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." That will become important in a moment. Hold on.

John gets taken up to a high mountain and is shown this big beautiful city that is shining with God's glory and with all sorts of jewels and gates and angels and pillars, and yes, streets made of pure smooth gold.

It's hard to imagine. It's so outside our experience. It's like trying to explain the color red to someone who was born blind.

What do we know about heaven?

We know there is only one way to get there.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4:11-12 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

We know that it doesn't compare to earth. Paul put it this way in Romans 8:18: *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

We know it's a place of perfection and a place of worship.

We get a couple of more interesting things in our reading today.

It has no temple.

Rev. 21:22 "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."

John Lennon:

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...*

John Lennon was wrong about no heaven and no hell, but if wonder if maybe he got it right about no religion?

What is religion? Man working his way to God. God working His way to people? Either way, it isn't present in heaven.

Think about the purpose of the Temple—the place God gave and “Caused His Name to dwell,” so His people could come to him. What we find in this new place is that God dwells among people, face to face, just like the Garden of Eden. There is no reason for a Temple to exist.

Think about something Jesus said in John 2: *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."*²⁰ *The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?"*²¹ *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*

In the new creation, the new heaven, Jesus is who He was always meant to be—the presence of God with God’s people.

Then John goes on to say that there is no light: Rev. 21:23 *The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.*

Let’s go back to day 1 of creation for a moment. On Day 1 God created light. On day 4, God created the sun and moon. God doesn’t need a sun and moon to have light. He didn’t in creation. He doesn’t in the new creation.

Then think about some things Jesus said.

John 9:5 *"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

Paul talked about it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:6 *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."*

So in the new creation, the new heaven, there is no temple and no light.

Why does God want us to know that? Or in other words, so what? What difference does it make to me today in Columbia Heights? How are we going to leave here differently today because we have learned that in heaven there is no temple and no sun? What difference does it make?

It makes a world of difference. Literally. If we can avoid, as the saying goes, being so heavenly-minded we are no earthly good, this bizarre picture today gives us what we need to make a difference in the world.

Remember I said we only had one voice in this reading. It was the voice of the angel, saying, *"Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."*

This is talking about the church. It's a picture of the church and what it will be in the new heaven, the new creation.

And it is a great reminder of who we are on earth as the church. Just as in heaven there was no temple, because the church was not a building, but a person, so it is on earth. The church is a people.

1 Cor. 3:16 "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

And what about that light that John says is different in heaven. No light in heaven because of the one who says "I am the Light of the World." On earth that same one says to us,

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

One day we will be walking on streets of gold. Until then we are here on the mean streets. And we are the temple and light.