

“I’m going to keep on signing ‘til my soul catches up with my song.” “I’ve wrestled with the darkness but I’m trying to reach for the light. Yeah, the struggle keeps me honest and it breaks down the walls of my pride ‘cause faith isn’t proven like gold ‘til it’s been through the fire.” I love these lines that Brandon Lake wrote and the band just sang because they’re so true. I don’t know about y’all, but I sometimes make life harder than it has to be. As we’ve been journeying through this brief stint in the Book of Revelation, I’ve been bringing my hard fought hallelujahs along because God always has a word for us- though we may not want to hear it or act upon it, especially from Revelation. Some of us may have PTSD from harmful misinterpretations of Revelation. I hope and pray that we all can experience Revelation with new, upside-down lenses. True confession. I haven’t always taught on or preached Revelation. Early on in ministry, I was too afraid to approach it because of the bad theology it could stir up. I also didn’t want to be asked all the questions that it can stir up. At one time I wished that it hadn’t made it into the Bible, but it did...though barely. I once agreed with another preacher who says this about Revelation, “I do not like its violence, its vindictiveness, its opaqueness, its psychotic visions, its attitude toward women, its enemy thinking, its dualistic worldview or its vacancy of love” (Barbara Brown Taylor, 11.4.12 [sermon](#) at The Washington Cathedral); however, I must say that after reading it this ‘go round, as crazy as it is and as crazy as some interpretations of it can still be, I must admit that there’s some big picture good news throughout this last book of the Bible. I have appreciated approaching Revelation in a new way: The End is the Beginning. I’m not so sure that there’s as much a vacancy of love here as I once thought- the way I WAS reading it. I’m not AS intimidated as I once was to dive in and explore- though I still don’t like the violence nor the bad attitude

toward women. What about you? Did you know that Revelation alludes to Israel's Scriptures more intensely than any other New Testament book (Greg Carey, *Connections*)? In particular, I find it fascinating to connect and compare Genesis as the other bookend of the Bible and also Ezekiel's priestly vision (40-48) with Revelation. Revelation makes important changes along the way that open up Ezekiel's priestly vision to everyone. And "if it's a beatific vision of God's end-game for creation you're looking for, well, there is no better place to look than these last two chapters of Revelation, with its golden streets and pearly gates- the place most Christians think of when they think of heaven, where death will be no more- no more tears, no more crying, no more pain. The seven plagues are all over; all the trumpets have been blown. Michael has defeated the Dragon and the Beast has gone down to the dust. And behold, there is rejoicing in heaven as the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and all the saints of God make their way to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Taylor). Just at the right time, and in just the right way, God consistently breaks through the brokenness and disorder of the human condition and brings us hope and possibility. For when all seems lost, these last words in Revelation recap the Bible's most central theme- the love and hope of Christ comes to you and to me. As Revelation draws to a conclusion, it allows its audience a tour of the new Jerusalem. Only at the end of the book does this reality that has been promised throughout Revelation unveil itself. These verses are often heard at memorial services and funerals because they focus on the end of life, not the beginning. But what does that mean for us today? Today marks the end of the Easter season, the time of the Christian year when the church lives in the shadow of God's victory in Christ over death. We continue to celebrate this victory by

looking back on that day of triumph, and looking ahead to the day when God completes this victory by making all things new at the return of Christ. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first go to God in prayer. **READ. PRAY.**

John's architectural, angelic tour guide for his last vision in Revelation shows him the features of God's radiant city. "The tour is modeled on the angel's tour of the new temple in the last part of Ezekiel, chapters 40-48. However, there are some important changes to note in Revelation. Here are several that caught my eye as I studied today's text. **1.** In this story, people do not go up to heaven; heaven comes down to them. "The earth is not struck by a rogue meteor, laid waste by aliens, destroyed by nuclear holocaust, or otherwise demolished so that humans have nowhere to go but up, like steam escaping a cosmic forest fire. That is Hollywood, not Revelation" (Taylor). Short aside and fun fact. Did you know that the word rapture isn't mentioned in the Book of Revelation at all?! No, it's not there so then why do so many of us associate the rapture with the end of times and thus with Revelation? I wonder if it's mostly because we believe what we're told rather than looking it up and studying God's word for ourselves and in groups. This kind of fed biblical teaching doesn't help us to grow as Christ's disciples; though it does help us to grow into someone else's disciples. Not Jesus' though. In Revelation the same triune God who was present in the beginning of time in Genesis...the same triune God who created the heavens and the earth and called them good is creating them anew. "The new Jerusalem comes down to rest on the same footprint where the old, troubled city once stood, and God comes too- joining humans right where they are" (Taylor). At the beginning of chapter 21 in verse 3, a loud voice from the throne in John's vision says, "See, the home of

God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” “In this vision of final destination, the arc of the divine bends down, not up. With a future like that, you can’t dismiss the earth now” (Taylor). Therefore, we who are on the battlefields of hardship, heartache and hard fought hallelujahs must continue in the struggle, never giving in to apathy, and we must endure to the end. In the immortal words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But the arc does not bend towards justice on its own—no, it only does so because faithful people pull it towards justice. It is an active exercise, not a passive one.

2. Notice that unlike in Genesis, the destination in today’s story is not a garden but a city. John refers to the tree of life (22:2) that stood in the middle of the garden in Eden in Genesis and to the other trees that provided food whenever Adam and Eve wanted it (2:9). The tree’s leaves also bring healing to the nations. John’s image shows that the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, who come from all over the world, will never again suffer from hunger or illness. Also, notice that New Jerusalem is a welcoming city, not a gated community. Whereas Ezekiel’s temple gate was shut so that “no one shall enter it” (44:1-2), the gates into New Jerusalem are perpetually open; they’re never shut by day and there will be no night there (Rev. 21:26). There’s no excuse as to why we can’t participate in God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. In our time when nations and neighborhoods take on nimbyism- Not In My Backyard- or nimcyism- Not in My Country- and thus, seek to secure themselves against outsiders, the church can claim Revelation’s vision of openness and multicultural welcome for all our cities

(Barbara Rossing, workingpreacher.org). How can we continue to be open here at Triune and beyond?

3. There is no temple in this city. That's right. Because God now dwells with the people, there's no need for someone or something to mediate God's presence. "The recurring image of the 'throne' is a central theme for Revelation. John's apocalyptic journey began with a tour of the heavenly throne-room back in chapters 4 & 5. But where is the 'throne of God and the Lamb' located here in Revelation 22? The text suggests that God's throne will move down from heaven, where it was in chapter 4, and will be located in the middle of the city that descends from heaven to earth" (Rossing). The temple will be the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb- just that, just them, with no furniture but a throne and no light but the light streaming from them- no roof, no walls, no altar- but lots of life-giving water. The river of life flows not from the temple like in Ezekiel's vision but from the throne of God and the Lamb, through the center of the processional street of the city. In the new Jerusalem, God won't be hard to find because we'll have such closeness with God now that we will see God's face (21:4). And if you've kept up in scripture, you know to see God's face and live to tell about it is a HUGE deal!

4. The tour of the city concludes with reference to God's servants who offer service and worship before the throne (22:3). "God's servants shall reign forever and ever. At a time when Rome claimed to reign forever, Revelation boldly proclaimed that it is God who reigns- not the Empire- and that God's servants will also reign with God. Note, however, that there is no object of the verb 'reign.'

God's servants do not reign over anyone else. The text invites us to explore ways to understand our reign NOT as dominion OVER, but as sharing in, God's healing of the world" (Rossing). These glimpses of a renewed earth inspire and motivate us. We, like John, understand what it means to live between the here and the not yet in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We understand what it means to live with the reality of light and shadows existing side by side. It is precisely in this tension and dissonance that we're called to serve and witness. Through each of our cities, by whatever name- the Reedy- there is a river flowing from the heart of God and the Lamb. It is the life-giving river of the water of life, into which each is baptized and sent out and by which we are renewed and filled with hope.

I love these words from preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor. She says, "to choose this destination is not about securing an advance ticket to heaven. It is about receiving citizenship papers." When someone is baptized in this beautiful, broken place, a compact summary of the rights and responsibilities of the citizens of the New Jerusalem are given in our baptismal vows. "Anyone who answers, 'I will, with God's help,' uses the future tense to accept a certain future- one that has not happened yet, but one with power to shape everything that happens next. To say 'yes' to it won't get any extra protection from hurricanes or other threats to your well-being; it may in fact make things harder instead of easier, with one important exception: you will never suffer from a shortage of high purpose in your life. You will never wonder where you came from and where you are headed. Your feet are pointed in a certain direction- toward full communion with God and neighbor; away from evil and despair; toward justice and peace among all people, away from anything that might persuade you to respect the

dignity of SOME human beings but not ALL” (Taylor). And if you ever notice that you’re getting turned around in your direction and you feel disconnected from God or lost, with God’s help, you can stop and turn around- repent. Sometimes you can even call for an Uber or Lyft or taxi and the Lamb will send someone to pick you up. “Because once you have chosen your destination, your destination chooses you. The minute words gets out about your citizenship ceremony, you gain a whole new crowd of coaches and cheerleaders- Christians call them saints- who are dedicated to helping you get where you mean to go- not just by the end of time but by the end of every single day” (Taylor). Christ invites all who are thirsty to come and drink this water of life. All are welcome, and through his invitation we are encouraged to offer a similar hospitality as we say, “come,” coming out to engage the O/other. For anyone who wants to accept this refreshing gift is invited to come. “Come” is a call to discipleship in the manner of Jesus. T.S. Eliot said it well: In my end is my beginning.” The One who is seated on the throne says it even better: “See, I am coming soon! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 21:6, 22:12-13). May it be so. May the Lord God Almighty be our GPS, Google/Apple Maps, Northstar, your A to Z, your First and your Last, your beginning and your end, your source and destination, both this day and forevermore. Come, Lord Jesus, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen!