

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

REVELATION 21:1-6
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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Despite what you might think based on the title, this morning's sermon has nothing to do with a Charles Dickens novel. ☺

On this first Sunday of the new school year, I want to talk about cities—about how we think about cities, how we live in cities, and about the role of the city in God's broader story.

Over the last few weeks, I've spent a lot of time in cities.

Our family spent a lot of time exploring around German cities—cities like Kempten, Ulm, Dachau, and Munich.

We scrambled through airports and looked out at major centers like Stuttgart, Frankfurt, and London.

We've wandered through a smaller Greek city on the Island of Crete.

As I walked through these cities, I often found myself marveling at how different they are from the one I live in. From the cobblestone streets of Bavaria to the congested seaside markets of Greece, to ancient ruins of an old fortress from sixteenth century Crete to a German church whose construction took over six hundred years, everywhere we looked we could see the trail of centuries of history.

But I've also noticed that every city is in some ways the same. People do the same things in cities around the world.

They get their groceries and drive their kids around, they go shopping and visit parks and restaurants, they read newspapers and watch TV, they stare at their phones, they drink coffee and talk about the weather. Kind of like here in Lethbridge.

And, of course, other cities aren't perfect.

You may not see obvious signs of this on the touristy paths of Europe, but it doesn't take too much time in any city before you begin to detect hints of the racial tensions that simmer just beneath the surface of everyday life or the economic inequality that divides people and nations or the petty selfishness and rivalry that governs so much human behaviour.

Cities are, in other words, a mixed bag, no matter where you go.

Not always to the same extent and not always for the same reasons, but cities are full of human beings and human beings are a mixed bag of mixed motives and mixed behaviour.

The Bible contains a fairly honest view of the cities of human beings. Indeed, it is striking how *negatively* cities are often portrayed.

Here's how one of my former professors, Darrell Johnson, describes it:

In the Bible, cities are places of arrogance and violence. Cain kills Abel and runs off to hide from God in a city. Humanity seeks to live independently from God and builds the tower of Babel. And, in... Revelation... 'the city of man' finally expresses itself in Babylon, 'The Harlot,' the embodiment of rebellion and immorality.

We could make our own additions to this list: Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Rome, Corinth, the list goes on and on...

Cities in the Bible were often places where God's authority over all of life was challenged or ignored. Cities are often places that embody the values and practices God's people find themselves in conflict with.

The twentieth century French philosopher/theologian Jacques Ellul sums up the Bible's view of the city by calling it an "anti-God reality":

The cities of man have been built as part of our attempt to run from God, to make our own world apart from God and away from the claims of the living God.

This sounds harsh, at first glance, but who among us could dispute it?

Who among us could look at the daily news and fail to see that cities are so often places where God's will is not done on earth as in heaven, where greed, selfishness, dishonesty, arrogance, idolatry, injustice, inequality, violence seem to dominate headlines.

On this day in particular we think of what happened in New York City fifteen years ago as the embodiment of the city as a source of conflict, but we could also think of the many cities around the world that have borne the brunt of war since then and before then.

So cities are this mixture of the good and the beautiful, the ordinary and the predictable as well as the violent, the evil and the idolatrous.

This is true in London and Munich and Damascus and Shanghai and Los Angeles and Johannesburg...

And little old Lethbridge, Alberta.

But what if this broad picture didn't tell the whole story? What if there was more than meets the eye?

What if things are not exactly as they seem in the cities of the world? In our city?

There is another city described in the Bible as well, and it's found in our text this morning from Revelation 21.

But before we get to the text itself, a word about the book of Revelation. There is probably no book in the Bible that has been so frequently misused and misinterpreted as Revelation. People have used it to try to work out the precise chronologies of when Jesus will return; they have tried to link figures in the book with political rulers from Napoleon to Stalin to George Bush!

But the book of Revelation is not (and was never intended to be read as) a blow-by-blow description of future events. If we read it this way, not only do we stand a very good chance of getting future events wrong, but we miss the point of the book.

Revelation is a *letter* (a strange letter, with all kinds of interesting symbols and imagery, but still a letter) written to *churches*.

John is writing from a prison cell on the island of Patmos (in between modern Greece and Turkey) to a group of churches that are suffering persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian, a deeply insecure tyrant who compensated for his insecurities by demanding that everyone in his empire worship him as “Lord.”

For the growing Christian church, this was a problem. If Jesus was Lord, the emperor, obviously, could not be. John is writing to the churches to encourage them to stay strong, to not give in, despite the persecutions that came by not bowing down to the emperor.

He is telling his brothers and sisters that as bad as things look, there is another reality at work—the reality of Jesus and his kingdom.

The way he does this is through a genre of literature called “apocalyptic.” The images of Revelation are odd, to our ears and eyes, but in the first century world, it was one of the ways that people communicated. It was a subversive way of referring to empires in coded language.

The book of Revelation—with all of its beasts, and dragons, etc.—is a strange book. But at the most basic level what it and all apocalyptic literature tries to do is show this basic truth: *things are not as they seem*; or, perhaps more specifically, *things are not **only** as they seem*. There is more to reality than meets the eye.

So, with this in mind, let's look at the text this morning and a different kind of city.

Despite all of the negative portrayals of cities throughout the Bible, when Jesus reveals himself to John on the island of Patmos, he describes the future God is preparing as, of all things, *a city*.

I think this it is important for us to take notice of this. Jesus does *not* give John the picture of Christians floating up into the sky as spirits to play harps on clouds or eat Philadelphia cream cheese!

Jesus does not give John an idyllic nature scene with sunsets or un-crowded beaches or mountaintops with a lone solitary figure with arms raised exultantly.

These are some of the images that we might come up with to capture our hope for the future, but Jesus describes a city.

Which means, apparently, that we are destined to live in community with one another.

Another twentieth century French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre famously said, "Hell is other people." Perhaps there are days when you are inclined to agree. 😊

But Jesus apparently disagrees. Our future destiny is one in which we live together, sharing in God's goodness and relationship with one another.

But it's not just any city. A *new* city.

A city that looks very different from any of the cities we are familiar with. It is a city where all of the negative things that characterize the cities of human beings are no longer present. No more death or mourning or crying or pain. A city of beauty, "like a bride dressed for her husband."

A city where God finally lives among his people, where human beings finally live lives of faithfulness as they were intended to live, a city where "the old order of things has passed away."

There are at least three things to notice about this text, specifically Rev. 21:5.

1. "All new things" or "all things new?"

God does not just scrap everything he has made—write it off as a mistake and try something totally different. God takes hold of the good things we have made bad—places, cities, human beings—and renews them, makes them new!

2. “Will make” all things new or “am making” all things new?”

“I am making all things new.” Right now—in the present, in another dimension of reality.

Do we believe this? Do we believe that God is, *right now*, making all things new in the cities of the world? In our city here in Lethbridge, Alberta?

Things don’t look very new, after all. In fact, they look pretty old. Just like every city that has ever existed, our city has crime, it has decadence and luxury for some, poverty for others, it has addictions, it has injustice, it has a mixture of beauty and decay. These are not signs of newness.

So why on earth would we believe that God *is making* all things new, right here and right now? Is the idea of a new city of truth, beauty, justice, security, peace, and the presence of the Lord just a fantasy a bunch of persecuted Christians dreamed up two thousand years ago to console themselves?

Where would we look for clues of this new reality—clues that *that* city is not just a figment of our imagination and that it really does have something to do with *this* city?

Well, in the book of Revelation, the clues come in the form of a community that does not give its ultimate allegiance to the emperor, a community that holds fast to the new reality of Jesus Christ even in the midst of great persecution and hardship, a community that gives of themselves to others.

The early Christians, at their best spoke and acted toward others as those who believed that human beings had dignity and worth in an Empire that did not. They believed that the love of God, shown in Jesus Christ, was more real and true than the brutal empires they were familiar with.

They believed that Jesus’ death and resurrection really did represent the defeat of evil and the turning point of God’s story *and they lived as though the tide had turned.*

Even when things looked *exactly* as they seemed—bleak, hopeless, dark.

What John wanted for the communities he addressed Revelation to, was for them to continue to live as though the city Jesus showed them—the city that represents the goal of history—is more real than what they were experiencing in their everyday lives.

So which city is more real/true for us?

The cities where we live and work and play and succeed and fail and love and hope. The cities where we see both good and evil, justice and injustice, joy and suffering.

Or the city described in Revelation 21.

Which city guides our thinking and acting in the world? The New Jerusalem or the cities of men? The world as it is or the world as *it will one day be*, the world that is being made new, even now?

It seems to me that one way of looking at the “big picture” story of Scripture could be as the movement from one city to another—from the city of men to the city of God.

It is our job, as Jesus’ followers, to allow *that* city to influence, to inform—to feed back into—how we live in *this* city.

At the outset of a new school year, when the ordinary rhythms and routines of church life are beginning, I think it’s important to be reminded that *everything* we do as a community—from our education programs to our corporate worship to our service in the community to our caring for and supporting one another—must have as its goal and its foundation these most basic of Christian convictions:

Things are not as they seem. God is making all things new. And we are to be formed as people according to the city of God, not the cities of men.

N.T. Wright puts it succinctly in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*:

Christians should live in the present as members, already, of the world that is yet to be.

In other words, Christians should live as if *that* city told a truer and fuller story of the world and of our destiny than *this* city.

One final point: in Revelation 21:2 the city of God is described as “coming down out of heaven *from God*.”

We do not bring about the city of God. It is not our job to turn Lethbridge into the New Jerusalem. The city of God is a *gift*.

We cannot make a city like this: no more death, no more tears, no more walls... it's too good to be true. It's unlike anything we have ever experienced or can imagine. But it's also the deepest thing we all long for.

One of my favourite bands is U2 and they have a line in one of their songs that I think is a great metaphor for how we follow Jesus in this city and wherever else we find ourselves throughout life's journey:

The sweetest melody is the one we haven't heard.

The city of Revelation 21 is a melody that none of our cities have ever heard. But it is the city we were made for. It is the city our hearts long for.

It is the city that *this* city—Lethbridge—needs to see glimpses of in the lives of Jesus' followers—in your life, in my life.

May God help us to be a people who proclaim, in word and deed, that *that* city has everything to do with *this* city.

Amen.