

"We are Citizens of Two Cities"

Revelation 21:1-7

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

July 4, 2010

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

You may think it strange that I have selected a scripture from the book of Revelation on this Lord's Day that also happens to fall on Independence Day. I chose it because I am intrigued by the promise of the restored city, and because it offers a word of hope our country so desperately needs these days.

What we see in the book of Revelation is an image of a city, and it is a beautiful image, like a bride! The word *city* derives from the same root as the word *civilization*. To be truly civilized is to be living the way God intended us to live. Harmoniously, cooperatively, caring for one another for and for our earth. Heaven is a city, not a solitude¹ Heaven is community, in the true and whole sense of the word. This is the community described in Revelation, an idealized community of peace and harmony and oneness with God.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 383.

Our challenge today as we celebrate the birth of our nation, as we ponder the myriad blessings that come from living in America---our first challenge today is to recognize that as Christians we live in two cities.

In Scripture we see how cities are supposed to be. A dozen Psalms tell us of the divine origin of Jerusalem. It was a place of protection and peace. The Gihon spring provided a source of precious water nearby. And yet, we also find in Scripture pictures of cities gone wrong, and what God does when that happens. There are many accounts of God's judgment on cities---Babel, Sodom, Babylon, Nineveh. A city can be a very good thing; it can also be a very bad thing.

Modern American cities encompass these same contrasts. While they boast wonderful culture and innovative technology, they are also places of enormous crime and oppression. We have made quite a mess of things. We are overwhelmed by the social, economic, and ecological problems we have created.

In the *City of God*, Augustine contrasts the earthly city with the heavenly city. He says, "The wise men of the one city, living according to humankind, have sought to profit. . . . But in the other city there is no human wisdom, only godliness."² The earthly city is characterized by the **love of self**, the heavenly city, by the **love of God**.

The city described in Revelation may be from heaven, but we live on earth. We have one foot in the city of Dallas, and the other in God's kingdom. Our two feet are rarely balanced. Most of our time is spent firmly planted in the city of the mundane; we only briefly step into the city of the divine. As Christians, we struggle between the often competing demands of these two places.

We continually seek to increase our citizenship in God's kingdom. We live between the "now" of the earthly city and the "not yet" of the heavenly city. We know things are not the way they are supposed to be, and a change of life---here and now--- is required.

Our second challenge today is to consider that 'change of life that is required' ----to increase our will and our effort toward kingdom making. It is a change in orientation that invites God to use us to bridge the gap between the 'now' and the 'not yet'.

² Augustine, "City of God," quoted in Gail Ramshaw, Treasures Old and New, Images in the Lectionary.

It is important to note that the kingdom city is **not merely something we attain after we die**. In Christ, we press on toward that new city now. The way we do this is to pray and work for the kingdom of God to be made manifest here in Dallas, here at LHPC. We are instrumental in building God's kingdom. We welcome others to God's city.

Martin Luther King's last sermon was delivered in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968, a little over 40 years ago. In what would be the final sermon of his life on earth, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King struggled with the tension between the "now" of our earthly citizenship and the "not yet" of living in God's kingdom city.

He said, "It's alright to talk about 'long white robes over yonder' . . . but people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee."

God's preacher must also talk about the new Dallas.

This morning's front page Metro news featured a story about the citizens of Lake Highlands protesting the city's planned housing development for the homeless, which would include some people who had formerly been incarcerated. And I was confronted with the hard question: What would we do? What would I do? What would Jesus do?

We long for and yet we fear the new Dallas. Because we know the new Dallas means we will have to give up some of the old.

Still we work for that new Dallas now, in our personal relationships, in our civic commitments, in our workplaces. We share what we believe with others at work or at school. We teach English as a second language. We help the hungry in East Dallas. We open our building with Christians who do not have the resources we have. We provide care at our Child Development Center for children whose parents cannot afford good care. We welcome people into our church who may live in a different way, or who may dress differently, or who may need more than we may be comfortable giving.

As your pastor of two and a half years, I am proud to say many of you here are oriented to living out God's kingdom. You are open and

flexible; you are generous and willing. Whenever I am with other pastors, especially pastors of other small churches, I realize how very blessed we are here. I am grateful for your diversity, for your willingness to embrace new things, and for your communal spirit.

There is a lot being done here. . .but God is not nearly done with us yet---there is more God has for us to do.

Even though God promises to create the new heaven and the new earth, it is up to us to enlarge the opportunities for God's kingdom now. This means more work outside our doors so that others who need Christ will come inside our doors. This means evangelical and mission projects in our community. It may even mean we engage in the work of justice, which is, after all, what the Declaration of Independence is all about.

It is up to us to tap into God's grace and live as though God really were living right next door. It is up to us to see Christ in every face we meet, and to respond to that face with compassion.

What does this work look like? It looks like urban renewal. It looks like political action. It smells like soup and soap for the homeless. It looks like people from differing political positions working together in harmony for the greater good. It is people making sandwiches; youth distributing groceries; citizens writing letters to lawmakers and congregation members canvassing neighborhoods.

What does the kingdom sound like? The quiet steady hum of a water pump purifying water in a small village in Guatemala. The murmur of car engines idling as church members deliver Meals on Wheels. The faltering words of children singing songs, learning the gospel. It sounds like a chorus of protest about the way things are, and a wave of voices calling for the way things should be instead.

This is the kingdom we meet this Fourth of July. The sort of kingdom delivered by the sort of God who gives not only glimpses, but who fulfills promises. The way things are supposed to be, as we live in two cities, and as God uses us to bridge the gap between them.