

Until That Time
John 5:1-9; Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5
Easter 6

Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5

¹⁰And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

^{21:22}I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

^{22:1}Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

John 5:1-9

⁵After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

The Sermon

What is it going to look like when God completes the story?

I mean the story of your life, and I mean the story of creation. I mean the story of salvation. What is the culmination of that going to look like?

The Book of Revelation has a vision for it: the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

There is no need for a temple; its temple is God and the Lamb.

Its light is the glory of God, and its lamp is the Lamb.

The nations will walk by its light, and the rulers of the earth will bring their glory into it.

Its gates are never closed.

The river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows through the middle of Main Street. On either side is the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun; God will be their light, in the holy city, the New Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the Old Jerusalem is not so bright and shiny. At a pool by the Sheep Gate, a sick man on a mat has spent most of his life—38 years—pinning all his hopes for healing on a kind of cure that could never happen.

Periodically, the water in these pools would stir, and the common belief was that that meant that an angel had touched the surface, which gave the water a healing power, but you had to be the first one in for it to have any effect.

Jesus came by and saw him lying there and knew he'd been there a long time, and he asked him: "Do you want to be made well?"

That's really the first question for any healer to ask. And the answer is sometimes more ambiguous than it may seem.

And the sick man didn't even answer the question; he just launched right into an account of how, time after time, day after day, year after year, decade after decade, he would pin his hopes on the possibility that next time, he could get into the water before anyone else.

But of course he could never make it—always doing the same thing and, for some self-defeating reason, expecting to get a different result.

Do you want to be healed?

Or do you prefer to stick with this, the only life you can imagine?

“Sir, I don't have anybody to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, somebody else always steps down ahead of me.”

And Jesus said, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”

And the man was made well, and he picked up his mat, and he began to walk.

He had finally received the gift of healing for which he had longed for 38 miserable years, just not in a way—or from a source—that he had ever expected or imagined.

When the New City comes down from heaven, there won't be that kind of long, silent, frustrated suffering met only by the same vague expectations and hopeless strategies, the same stupefying absence of imagination.

This past week, David Brooks published an editorial in the New York Times in which he said, “This election...has reminded us how much pain there is in this country. [Our job] is to figure out the right response.”

He said, “We'll probably need a new national story... I don't know what the new national story will be, but maybe it will be less individualistic and more redemptive.

“Maybe it will be a story about communities that heal those who suffer from addiction, broken homes, trauma, prison and loss, a story of those who triumph over the isolation, social instability and dislocation so common today.”

“We’ll also need,” wrote David Brooks, “to rebuild the sense that we’re all in this together...Maybe the task is to build a ladder of hope. People across America have been falling through the cracks...

“We can start at the personal level,” he wrote, “just by hearing them talk.”ⁱ

One day, that shining city will descend from the heavens.

Until that time, we can be there for each other. We can be a presence—an active presence—for all God’s people (which is all people). And the way to start that is to model listening.

Jesus asked the sick man if he wanted to be made well.

And then he listened to what the man had to say.

The question opened the door for one sick man to open up about 38 years of frustration, of feeling abandoned, of the ache in his body and the ache of loneliness in his soul, of being sick and tired of being sick and tired.

There is so much pain here. We bring it from our past; we bring it from our depths; we bring it from places deep inside that most of the time we don’t even know very much about. Sometimes we carry that pain around with us for so long that eventually the pain carries us around with it.

One day the New Heavens and the New Earth will come; the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven. Until that time, we have work to do on this old earth, which is not always so radiant and where darkness is still part of our reality.

And some of us will spend 38 years or more, waiting for an opportunity to come, day after day somehow expecting that it’s going to be different this time, that the waters will begin to stir and somehow I’ll make it in there first.

Even though that never, ever happens.

Even though there is no scenario in which it could happen.

Even though I may be expecting healing to happen in a way that has nothing to do with reality.

It takes Jesus to bring the healing that only God can give.

One day that shining city is going to come down from heaven.

Until that time, there are people who have been waiting far too long to get help, and the children of God, the body of Christ, the inspired, can help them.

Until that time, we wait and pray and do whatever we can with whatever we have to make God's kingdom a reality for everyone who shares this life with us.

I know, because you tell me, that you want to serve in the world in response to God's call on your life, in deep, tearful compassion for the suffering of the world, and in gratitude for your blessings.

God has blessed us with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, and empowers and encourages us to put all of those, and all of our resources, to good and holy use—whatever we can do, for whomever we can help, with whatever resources that we may have, including whatever time may be left to us.

And it can start with listening to each other, and to being open to hearing about where it hurts.

And then being willing at least to try to do something about it.

Let's pray with Ted Loder.

O God, I am so fragile:
my dreams get broken,
my relationships get broken,
my heart gets broken,
my body gets broken.

What can I believe,
except that you will not despise a broken heart,
that old and broken people shall yet dream dreams,
and that the lame shall leap for joy,
the blind see,
the deaf hear.

What can I believe,

except what Jesus taught:
that only what is first broken, like bread,
 can be shared;
that only what is broken
 is open to your entry;
that old wineskins must be ripped open and replaced
 if the wine of new life is to expand.

So, I believe, Lord;
help my unbelief
 that I may have courage to keep trying
 when I am tired,
and to keep wanting passionately
 when I am found wanting.

O God, I am so frail:
my life spins like a top,
 bounced about by the clumsy hands
 of demands beyond my doing,
fanned by furies
 at a pace but half a step from hysteria,
 so much to do,
 my days so few and fast-spent,
 and I mostly unable to recall
 what I am rushing after.

What can I believe,
 except that beyond my limits
 of my little prayers and careful creeds,
I am not meant for dust and darkness,
 but for dancing life and silver starlight.

Help my unbelief
 that I may have courage
 to dare to love the enemies
 I have the integrity to make;
to care for little else
 save my brothers and sisters of the human family;
to take time to be truly with them,
 take time to see,

take time to speak,
take time to learn with them
before time takes us;
and to fear failure and death less
than the faithlessness of not embracing love's risks.

God, I am so frantic:
Somehow I've lost my gentleness
in a flood of ambition,
lost my sense of wonder
in a maze of videos and computers,
lost my integrity
in a shuffle of commercial disguises,
lost my gratitude
in a swarm of criticisms and complaints,
lost my innocence
in a sea of betrayals and compromises.

What can I believe,
except that the touch of your mercy
will ease the anguish of my memory;
that the tug of your spirit
will empower me to help carry now the burdens
I have loaded on the lives of others;
that the example of Jesus
will inspire me to find again my humanity.

So, I believe, Lord;
help my unbelief
that I may have courage
to cut free from what I have been
and gamble on what I can be,
and on what you
might laughingly do
with trembling me
for your incredible world.ⁱⁱ

One day the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven, shining with God's glory, and there will be no darkness, and no pain, and no fear.

Until that time, the body of Christ—and the Christ in you—are called to go into the city to bring healing.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
May 1, 2016

ⁱ David Brooks, “If Not Trump, What?” *New York Times*, April 29, 2016
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/opinion/if-not-trump-what.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad>)

ⁱⁱ Ted Loder, “What Can I Believe?” in *Guerillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1984.