

Three week conclusion to sermon studies in Revelation:

The New Creation – Full Communion with God

4/28 The NEW Heavens and Earth (21:1-7)

5/5 The NEW Jerusalem (21:9-14,21-27)

5/12 The NOW Invite: Come! (22:1-20)

Grace to you and peace from Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to God. To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

We pray, Oh Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see and hear what you have caused to be written for our learning. Amen.

The New Creation – Full Communion with God

The NEW Jerusalem

(Part 2 of 3)

A recent newspaper article reported the impact of religion in the local community. The basic consensus of those interviewed was that you should choose a church that fits you best. As one pastor said, if you had a bad experience in one church, try another – there are lots of churches out there.

He is right that there are a lot of churches. How does a person even begin to find the right church? What church will fit your needs?

One of the local churches offers a theater and climbing wall. That sounds pretty exciting.

What if I said that God offers something better? What if God offered a Church with a beauty that far surpasses any church you've ever belonged to. It shines like precious stones, has gates of pearl, is paved with streets of gold.

Perhaps you are still drawn to the climbing wall.

What if I said that God actually has built something even greater than a streets of gold? The book of Revelation is presents this in figurative terms; the symbols indicate something even greater than what we see. The far surpassing beauty is that this city is eternally free from sin. This is full communion with God.

This Church, called "the holy city," cannot be seen advertised in the local news paper. Map Quest cannot pull up directions on your computer.

Revelation 21:9–14, 21:21–27 (NKJV)

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife."

10 *And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,*

11 *having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.*

12 *Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:*

13 *three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.*

14 *Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*

...

21 *The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.*

22 *But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*

23 *The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.*

24 *And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it.*

25 *Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there).*

26 *And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.*

27 *But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.*

The holy city descends from above. It is, even now, held in the hands of God. The Spirit writes in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, (Hebrews 12:22-23)

The New Jerusalem is not an earthly membership. The membership is registered in heaven. We cannot see it or touch it. As Paul writes to Timothy – “the Lord knows those who are His.” So our text also says membership involves only those “whose names are written in the book of Life” (21:27).

This book cannot be seen or opened until the Last Day, as chapter 20 of Revelation reveals – *I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God and the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. (Revelation 20:12)*

Until this heavenly city comes down, it will not be seen. It is not seen in our works; it is not seen in our nation; it is not seen in our denomination.

Part of us would prefer things the other way around. We like a things more visible and tangible. We would like a church with a climbing wall. What I mean is – we like a church where we can climb our way to the top; where we can see our progress. ... Last week I was down there, this week I'm up here. That guy is still way back. I really need to catch up to her, though, she always seems a step ahead.

We should quickly realize that this is not really something we want. This is the Old Mountain, the Earthly Jerusalem, and it leaves us under the curse of the Law. Hebrews calls this "the mountain that is touched and burned with fire, the blackness and darkness; the sound of a trumpet speaks words we cannot bear." To rely on our progress as compared to other people, is to rely on a mound of expectation and debt that we cannot climb over – no matter how we outwardly relate to other people.

12 Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel.

The true Israel stands atop Mount Zion, a dwelling of faith and not works. Throughout the book of Revelation the number 12 represents the Church – the assembly of the saints. The spiritual Jerusalem is made up of all those who truly believe the gospel and who follow the Lamb by faith.

For the promise that [Abraham] would be the heir of the world was not to [him] or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4:13) ... because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression. (Romans 4:15) ... Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (Romans 4:16)

The great city is not comprised of those who have climbed their way to the top. It is comprised of weak sinners like you and me who, like Abraham, have found themselves at the bottom – in desperate need of God's gracious work in Christ. Only God's grace can bring us into this eternal book, only His grace can choose those who least deserve it, only His grace can give us eternal life.

So it's not a matter of climbing the wall to the top; ... its not a matter of belonging to Ascension Lutheran Church, or calling yourself a Lutheran, or calling yourself a Christian; ... so how can I be certain that my name is written in that book?

"Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." Come with me dear fellow citizens with the saints, dear members of the household of God. The Spirit is taking us to a high mountain, to give us a glimpse into heaven. And we have it right before us in God's Word. Come and God will show you – your baptism.

We read in Ephesians, *Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25–27)*

This chapter of Ephesians compares the relationship between Christ and the Church to a marriage – the two become one. Through baptism you have become one with Christ and been drawn into communion with God. He “gave Himself for the Church” to “sanctify and cleanse here with the washing of water and the Word.” This is a gift of God’s grace.

In water the word works wonders. The Word works the wonder of washing away your sins; Through Christ, God washes away the natural sin you are born with; He washes away the foolish sins you commit as a child; He washes away the the foolish sins you commit as a husband, as a wife; He washes away those evil inclinations which you seem to lack any self control over; He washes away those actions which have stained in your past. The word works the wonder of salvation, delivering you from death and the devil.

As Verse 27 says, *there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie.*

The bride is prepared: cleansed and adorned... through the Lamb’s pro-active suffering, death, and resurrection, you are cleansed from sin. Through the Lamb’s pro-active obedience, the bride is adorned with righteousness. *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Galatians 3:27)*

The beauty of the jasper stone is given in Christ. As we read earlier from Ephesians ... *that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:27)*

So what will sustain this beautiful creation until the last day? This last week our treasurer reported that we still haven’t paid our April mortgage and only once thus far this year have we met our weekly offering budget. And what tends to be our first thoughts? “... time to cough it up.” We start looking around – wondering why those other people (whoever they are) aren’t giving more – they can afford it (as if we know how much others give or what they can afford).

Church is not sustained because of what I am giving, nor is does it falter because offerings dwindle. The beauty of the heavenly city is not seen in offering records or membership numbers. To compare what other members are doing to what I am doing is like making the church into a climbing wall. This is a call for us not to look around, but to look to Christ.

God is determined to beautify His Church – not in self-centered offerings; but in Christ-centered gifts. This beauty is found only in Christ and is preserved only in Christ.

22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

Sound pretty good, doesn't it. No more concern about the light bill. The Church is illumined not because we pay the bills; but because God dwells among us in Christ. As Luther explains in the catechism – "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

This is all the more reason to find the right church on earth. Nothing could be more precious than the gospel of free forgiveness and the true teachings of God's Word – not climbing walls, not choirs, not numbers – The Word remains God's means of saving us and dwelling with us.

We need this local congregation, this place to gather. Here the gospel is giving us God's Spirit, forgiving your sins, sanctifying and presenting you blameless before God. As Luther also explained: "In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers, ... and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

This is what moves us to offer our hearts and lives to Him. This is what moves us to pay the bills, to support a pastor, to offer all that we can toward the work of God's kingdom. The greatest beauty before God is not by amount or comparison, but in the widow to give her two mites – a hidden love for God and the work that saves. For God is ever more concerned about our hearts than anything else. Yes, God has redeemed you to be His own special thank-offering. For this we give ourselves freely.

There are a lot of churches out there. So is this church the right fit for you? It may not offer a climbing wall or a theater; but we pray that it always offers something greater – the true proclamation of forgiveness; the true spiritual communion that comes through the Sacraments. We long for the day where this communion will be made full, where the New Jerusalem will come down to the New Creation – no longer any divisions among churches, the gates are never shut, a city which has no night or darkness, nothing to fear, for the Lamb shines among us forever. Amen.