

SERMON TITLE: “A Tale of Two Cities”

TEXT: Revelation 21:1-6

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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DATE: November 1, 2009/All Saints Day

INTRODUCTION

I’m going to begin a bit differently today. I’m going to start with a question. The question might seem odd at first—it may not even make total sense. But I want to put it out there and hopefully it will become clearer as we go:

What would you do if you believed that the everyday reality you see and live in this city did not tell the whole story of what is going on?

Let me try to explain. There is a “taken-for-grantedness” that can creep into our everyday experience of life in this city, or any city. We get our groceries, we take our kids to school and sports, we go to shopping malls and parks and restaurants, we read newspapers and watch TV and see stories of crime and corruption, mismanagement and greed and waste; we do our best to avoid the nasty parts of town, to keep ourselves and our children safe.

We understand the way cities work, and we adapt our lives accordingly. Of course there are many cities around the world that are more dangerous, more corrupt, and more unpredictable than Nanaimo, but on a very general level our city is like many other cities around the world and throughout history.

There is goodness, there is evil. And we try to chart the safest course through the two. Our lives as Christians are about surviving in the city while (hopefully) doing what good we can along the way.

But the city won’t change. We know this. We know that in a fallen world with fallen people living in fallen cities bad things happen.

But what would you do—how would you live—if you believed that this everyday reality that you and I see and live in this city was only a part of the story—and maybe not even the most important part?

This is the question I want you to have in the back of your minds for our time together this morning.

Well, despite what you might think based on the title, this morning’s sermon has nothing to do with a Charles Dickens novel; rather, it is the next step in our journey through our church’s mission statement:

To build committed followers of Jesus Christ—to do his work in our city, country, and world.

We've spent most of our time thus far looking at what our job as a church is. We have asked the "what" and the "who" questions so far:

- Who are we? (workers, followers, Christ's body on earth...)
- What is our job? (to build the above...)
- Who are we to follow? (Jesus Christ—not Superman!)
- What is our work? What does it look like? (believing in the one whom God sent, building Christ's kingdom...)

One of the important truths that underlies our mission` to build committed followers of Jesus... is the conviction that *things are not just as they seem*.

Today, and for the next few sermons, we're going to shift from the "what" and the "who" of our mission statement to the "where?" *Where* do we live out our vocation as individuals and as a church? Where do the committed followers of Jesus Christ that we are building do his work?

On one level, the answer to this question is fairly obvious and probably doesn't seem to warrant an entire sermon (much less three!). Our mission statement applies to where we happen to live. End of story.

Well, maybe not. We still need to ask: What does it mean to follow Jesus in *our* city? How do we understand our city as a part of our mandate as a kingdom community?

THE CALL OF THE CITY

Well this is role the city played in *my* imagination as a kid.

I was raised on a farm near a small town of less than six thousand people on the prairies of southern Alberta and from as long as I can remember I have had a weird fascination with cities.

Cities were first and foremost places I *didn't* live. Cities were places where "city kids" lived and "city kids" were *not* like me. City kids didn't have to come home after school and work in smelly pig barns. City kids didn't have to spend 45 minutes on a school bus every morning. City kids didn't have to get up early to move irrigation pipes. City kids could ride their bikes and go to swimming pools and shopping malls after school. City kids spent their summers at parks and pools instead of in barns and fields. City kids lived lives of ease and recreation, free from the sweat and toil of farm work.

As I saw things, city kids were also quite a bit cooler than farm kids. They listened to better music, they dressed in more fashionable clothes, and they went to bigger and better parties. City kids got to attend big rock concerts (!!). City schools usually destroyed our school's sports teams in football, volleyball, and basketball...

On a more personal (and painful!) level, city hockey teams usually beat *my* hockey team—and they usually had fancier uniforms and better equipment than us to boot!

The city also held the promise of risk and danger. It was the site of rebellion—a place where you could push beyond the constraints of a small conservative rural community. In the city, you could blend in with the crowd. You could get caught up in the euphoria. You could try new things—*forbidden* things, *dangerous* things, things you weren't supposed to do, things that are easier to hide in cities than in small towns. This, too, was part of the allure of the city.

To sum it up, “the city” was mostly an object of longing for me in my younger years. It represented what I wanted to be and to do. It stood for options I thought I was deprived of.

At least this is how it seemed to a moderately disgruntled farm kid. As silly (and ungrateful!) as it seems looking back now, the city stood for what I didn't have and couldn't be.

CITIES IN SCRIPTURE

Well I no longer have such a romantic view of cities. I've actually lived in a few cities, and I know that for the most part they are fairly ordinary places filled with fairly ordinary people doing fairly ordinary things.

I also know that along with opportunities for adventure and opportunity, cities have their dark sides.

The writers of Scripture also knew of the dark side of cities. One thing that struck me as I did a quick scan of the cities of the bible was how *negatively* cities are often portrayed.

Here's how one writer, 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, Ephesus, the list goes on and on...

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

The French 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.

REVELATION & APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

These are the kinds of cities we are familiar with. When we look at our city we see many of the things we've just talked about in the cities of the Bible: greed, selfishness, dishonesty, arrogance, idolatry, violence, etc.

But 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*. It says this right in the opening words of the book:

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...

These are specific places with specific churches and specific people. 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 (e.g., Daniel) 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.

And understanding that things are not only as they seem ought to have a major impact on our perspective and our behaviour as followers of Jesus.

So, with this in mind, on to our text this morning and a different kind of city.

READ REVELATION 21:1-6

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 describes a 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.

But it is still a city—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 two 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, right here in Nanaimo, British Columbia?

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*.

THAT CITY, THIS CITY

So which city is more real/true for us? The New Jerusalem or the cities of men? 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. Cities like Nanaimo.

Or the city described in Revelation 21.

Do you believe that things are not as they seem? Do you believe that there is a deeper reality than the one you see as you live and work and play in this city? Does it matter?

What does *that* city (the New Jerusalem) have to do with *this* city (Nanaimo)?

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 cities 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.

Last week James talked about his discussion with the lady on the airplane. Remember the conversation? She asked him what her purpose in life was and James responded by asking her if she actually believed life had a purpose. Her life didn’t seem to give much evidence that she actually believed this. Her behaviour didn’t seem to match her belief that what she did was meaningful, that it mattered, that there was a way a life ought to be lived.

In the same way, does how we look at and live in our city give evidence that we really believe that God is making all things new, right now? Does it give evidence that we believe that the nature of the city of God in Revelation 21 is “more real” than the city of Nanaimo in 2009?

Examples of how our lives as individuals or as a church give evidence of things being new (each one represents a story I’ve heard):

- Visiting the jail work, showing compassion and love to the discarded and forgotten
- Working with/caring for people with mental/physical disabilities
- Treating difficult kids at school with grace
- Caring for the physical space God has given us to live
- Deliberately investing in one another’s lives in a culture that by default encourages individualism and fragmentation
- Volunteering to drive cancer patients with no transportation to the hospital
- Giving generously to those in need as an expression of gratitude for all God has given us
- Talking about Jesus in a coffee shop on Sunday nights
- Proclaiming the gospel, in word and deed, to our friends and neighbours
- *Taking every opportunity that presents itself to show those we come into contact with that there is a deeper, more hopeful reality at work behind the scenes*

There are obviously many other examples we could point to. But the important thing to note is that each of these acts bears witness to the basic truth of Revelation in general, and our text this morning in particular: *things are not as they seem!*

There is something going on behind the scenes. God is at work in the city—in *this* city.

People who believe this inevitably make their cities better places!

THE CITY OF GOD

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 Nanaimo 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.

Naomi and I went to see U2 on Wednesday night, so you knew I had to find a way to work a U2 song into this sermon! One of the songs they played on Wednesday night contains a lyric that I think fits beautifully with this morning's text. I've used it before, but I'll use it again because I think it 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—Nanaimo—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.

May God help us to continue to build and become committed followers of Jesus to do his work in *this* city. May God help us to give our city little sound bites of the melody that we haven't heard but that we all long for.

Amen.