

HEAVEN

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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6^h Sunday of Easter, May 20, 2001.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Several weeks ago, after the death of **Perry Como**, National Public Radio rebroadcast an interview with the singer recorded several years ago. What Mr. Como said near the end of the interview intrigued me. He was asked about future plans. Remember he was about 80 years old. He answered, "I would like to go to heaven." He said it kind of matter of factly, like he wanted to take a trip back home to his native Cannonsburg, PA. I liked what he said. "I would like to go to heaven." He said it and then chuckled, a small relaxed Perry Como chuckle. I always liked Perry Como. I like him more now because I would also like to go to heaven.

A seminary professor would ask his students, "How many of you would like to go to heaven when you die?" Every hand in the classroom shot up. "How many of you would like to go today?" Every hand was quickly retracted. Most people want to put heaven off for a while especially if it means some kind of shadowy, ghostly, bodiless existence throughout eternity. But I'll rephrase the question in a more theologically correct way, "How many would like heaven to come to earth today?" Every Sunday we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." St. John the Divine, in the last chapters of the last book of the Bible describes a vision of heaven coming down to earth. John has already talked about the return of Christ, the general resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. Now he talks about new heavens and earth. He writes, I was carried away to a great, high mountain and was shown the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. In John's vision of the City of God, he shows us a picture of the heaven God has destined his people to enjoy forever.

Heaven is like a city, John tells us. A city is a place where there's work to be done. There's excitement and action and stores with merchants selling all kinds of merchandise. A city is a complex, cosmopolitan place where all kinds of people of different races, classes, nationalities, have to learn to live together, work together, depend on each other, cooperate with each other, be responsible to and for each other in order to survive. On the other hand, a city is a place where there's room for real individuality, freedom from the smothering conformity and rigid conventions often imposed on people who live in small towns (Guthrie).

Heaven is like a city enriched by the art and music and poetry of the various cultures of the world. "Kings will bring their glory into it. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." Great art, music, poetry, science, mathematics, whether or not overtly Christian will become part of the pageantry of heaven glorifying the crucified, risen, and reigning, Jesus Christ (Guthrie). Far from excluding art, the City of God will redeem and fulfill the artistic longings of the peoples of the world. The music of African tribal drums will resound. The gongs and cymbals of Asia. The cultural heritage of Europe and America. Mississippi Delta Blues, Jazz, Gospel music, everything that has enriched and beautified and uplifted the lives of past nations and kingdoms and empires. Everything honorable, beautiful, and good will be brought into the City of God. But nothing unclean will enter, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood. No one in the City of God will rob you either with a six gun or a fountain pen. Children can play in the parks without fear of perverts stalking them. Heaven is a glorious city where there are no dimly lit streets and back alleys, the haunts of drug pushers. No more energy shortages and rolling black outs - for God Almighty provides the light. The Lamb of God takes away not only the sin of the world but its darkness.

Heaven is like a city without any church buildings. "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." Some of you may be thinking, "What a relief! I won't have to go to church anymore." In heaven, in the City of God, God will be loved, praised, and served without ceasing, but there'll be no more church because there'll be no more need for the church. We will all know, love God, and obey God. The task of the church will have been accomplished (Guthrie). But we *do* need a church now. So many people don't know God, and none of us know God as well as we should. So many of us don't love God, or don't love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. And none of us obey God one hundred percent. We *need* the church now. We need church buildings. But the world doesn't exist for the sake of the church, the church exists for the sake of the world. Our task is to proclaim that God has come to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our job is to proclaim that God in Christ is for the world. God loves the world, not just Christians and the church. God in Christ has bled out his life to redeem the world.

Heaven is like a city where we will see God everywhere we look. The City of God is hardly reflected in the smog-polluted, traffic-congested, crime-ridden, heartless cities people live in now. Modern cities only magnify and multiply the brutal competitiveness and indifference to the needs and suffering of others. God's face is hidden now. God's power and presence is hidden. We look for God and too often do not see him. We pray to God and often wonder if God listens. We cry and wonder if God cares. God's face is hidden. But heaven is a city where we'll see God face to face.

The vision of heaven as the City of God is exactly what we need today if we are every going to reform our towns and cities. Oxford needs a vision -- a vision of the City of God. Our church needs a vision. As residents of Oxford we need opportunities to get together as a diverse community to share our individual visions for the future of Oxford, with the hope that a more inclusive vision will emerge. I propose that the people of Oxford and the members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church dream a future -- inspired by the vision of the City of God. We're blessed with a wealth of hidden talent and creativity that need to be brought into the City of God and used in the service of Christ. We have wonderful, unsung poets and writers -- I challenge you to dream a future Oxford. Tell us the future you see. Show us! Words are powerful -- some say the most powerful things in the world to create a new future. I challenge artists to show us through artistic expression your vision of a new Oxford as the City of God whose streets are lined with trees whose leaves are for the healing of our divisions. I challenge architects and civil engineers to build a diorama of your vision of Oxford's future with the life giving river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. I challenge musicians to compose music that will enable us to hear the sounds of the citizens of the City of God worshipping the Lamb. I challenge teachers to encourage your students to dream a new Oxford where nothing accursed will be found there any more. Imagine God's future -- the City of God. Imagine an America reconciled to our deepest convictions, and an Oxford concerned not only about architecture and merchandise but relationships between all sorts and kinds of people.

The City of God is God's gift. It comes down from heaven. We can't build it. We can't buy it. We can't earn it. But when the great hope of the City of God is truly alive, and we keep the vision of the City of

God constantly before us, hope arises for alleviating the sufferings of our present world (The Study Catechism).

I want to go to heaven. Rather, I want heaven to come to earth. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.
The City of God

Together let us pray in unison hymn 453 as our closing prayer:

O holy city, seen of John,
Where Christ, the Lamb, does reign,
Within whose foursquare walls shall come
No night, nor need, nor pain,
And where the tears are wiped from eyes
That shall not weep again!

O shame to us who rest content
While lust and greed for gain
In street and shop and tenement
Wring gold from human pain,
And bitter lips in blind despair
Cry, "Christ has died in vain!"

Give us, O God, the strength to build
The city that has stood
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,
Whose ways are servanthood,
And where the sun that shines becomes
God's grace for human good.

~~Already in the mind of God~~
That city rises fair.
Lo, how its splendor challenges
The souls that greatly dare,
And bids us seize the whole of life
And build its glory there. Amen.