

May 26, 2019 – Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27

We are the new Jerusalem. If you weren't here last week, that was the main take-away from my sermon. We are the new Jerusalem. We are the city of God, made new by baptism. We are the place where God dwells. Directly in our midst, through bread and wine, body and blood, offered regularly from this altar.

Though the old Jerusalem of John's day was destroyed by war. Though the old Temple was torn apart by the Romans and, to this day, remains a pile of rubble. God has not abandoned his people. Just as he was always present in his holy city. In his holy Temple. In his holy Church. Immanuel is indeed still with us.

That's where we left off last week. And I felt like it was important to review that. Because this week's lesson is a direct continuation of chapter 21. We ended at verse seven last week and we're picking up with verse nine this morning.

And we find that this depiction of us as the new Jerusalem is a picture of us right now and also a picture of us in the future. In Lutheran terms, we would say this is a 'now and not yet' moment. Something that is true right. And yet also something that will be fulfilled even more fully on the last day. Now and not yet. The Bible is packed with these kinds of statements and promises and prophecies.

And so we are now the new Jerusalem. The bride of Christ, with God in our midst. And we are not yet the new Jerusalem as we will be when Christ returns and makes all things new.

The new Jerusalem we will one day be will descend from heaven itself. The church will not just be the bride of Christ. We will be the wife of Christ. For the marriage feast will arrive in its fullest. Not just disguised in, with, and under bread and wine. But an actual feast of victory for our God. And at that moment, God and church will stand together not just as bride and groom, but as husband and wife.

And as the wife of Christ, the church will radiate the very glory of God. We will be adorned with rare jewels and crystal and pearl and gold. And the light of God will shine forth from every street and every home with nothing to hinder it. And nothing unclean or detestable or false will be in our midst. We will be the city on a hill that Jesus once declared us to be. Not hiding our lights under baskets, but displaying them for all to see.

In short, the church will be exactly the way God always meant us to be. Without sinful bodies. Without sinful motives. Without bickering or bitterness. Without deceit or malice. Without selfishness or pride. Without all the things that keep us from doing the work of His Church.

The picture of the new Jerusalem that we see here is us without all the things that hold us back as the people of God. We are the new Jerusalem. But we don't always look like this city.

And that, honestly, should make us a little sad. This is, overall, a very comforting passage. But I also think it's meant to be a wake-up call. A wake-up call to a church that needs to see just how far we are from the glory of God.

Which was really John's stated intent from the very beginning. This Revelation begins with John's letters to the seven churches of Asia. And those letters aren't especially flattering.

He accuses them of forgetting their love for God. Of tolerating sexual immorality and false teachers. Of being dead in their faith and works. Of being so lukewarm in their love for their neighbor that God is ready to spit them out altogether.

But then he makes this stark contrast between their ugliness and the beauty of the new Jerusalem. And I have to think God is saying through John, "This is who you are. The bride of Christ. The city of God. But this is not what you look like. Not to God. Not to the world."

And that matters. Because, as the city of God, as the kingdom of God on earth, we are the gateway to knowing Jesus. That's the other image that John presents to us in this passage.

He says that the new Jerusalem has a great, high wall, with twelve gates. And on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are inscribed. And these gates point north and south, east and west. To the four corners of the earth. And under this wall are twelve foundations, each with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

That wall is us. Those gates are us. We defend the kingdom of God against its enemies. With the message of the Apostles as our foundation. With God's Word as our strength and our shield.

But those twelve gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel because they represent the people of God. They represent us. We defend the kingdom of God. But more importantly, we welcome people in.

We welcome them in from the four corners of creation. From the north and south, east and west. John says that the nations of the earth see the light of God in our midst and it is by that light that they walk. It is by that light that the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into the kingdom of God.

But why are they able to enter? Because the new Jerusalem's gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there. Because our gates will never be shut by day. Because there is never a time when God's light doesn't bring people into our midst.

We are the gateway to the kingdom of God. We are the gateway to knowing Jesus Christ. If a person is going to know the love of God through Jesus' death and resurrection, it is going to happen because we tell them. We are the gateway to the kingdom of God.

And we're a gateway not just for strangers and people in far off places. We're the gateway for our children and grandchildren. We're the gateway for all the kids who come through our preschool and kindergarten. And we're the gateway for all their parents and grandparents as well. We're the gateway for our family and our friends. Our neighbors and our community.

And our message is simple. You don't need to be unclean anymore. You are welcome in the kingdom of God because he will wash your robes and make them white in the blood of the lamb. You are welcome in the city of God because your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

How can we say that? How can we know that their name – that our name – is written in the Lamb's book of life? Well, that's pretty easy. This isn't the first time that God talks about having a book of life. He mentions it in Exodus 32, for example. And he tells Moses that anyone who sins against him will have their name removed. So to be sure you have your name written in God's book of life just means you have to... not sin.

OK, so maybe that's not quite so helpful. But, you see, there's a difference here. This isn't just God's book of life. The God of Law and the 10 Commandments. This is the Lamb's book of life. The Lamb who's blood has washed us clean. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

If Jesus died for you then you are written in his book of life. And Jesus did die for you. And for every other person in this world. So we do not need to fear if our names are written there. They are. And he proved it by dying on the cross. By baptizing us with water and his Spirit. By sending faith into our hearts.

He has called us by name. We are his. We are in his book of life. And so we dwell with the Lamb in this new Jerusalem. And we pray every day that the filth of sin that disguises God's glory may be washed from our walls and our streets and our homes.

And that our gates may be open. So that all the world may see the light of God shining from within us. So that all may see the Lamb dwelling in our midst. And know that the God who washed us clean and made us his people will also wash them clean until they shine like rare jewels before their creator and savior. Amen.