

Revelation 21:10 and 21:22 – 22:5
May 9, 2010

South Plains
Mother's Day

Dreams and Heaven on Earth

Next to songs about romantic love between men and women, songs about mother love must surely be the most popular topic for music lovers. The love a mother has for her child; and the nostalgic love of the child of every age for his or her mother – those are enduring emotions that strum the heart strings of every human being.

Going home, going home, I'm just going home.
Mother's there, Father too, I'm just going home.

When Christians speak or dream about heaven, we return to the theme of being reunited with family and the people we love. However, my observation is that we do not spend a lot of time in church talking about heaven, except at funerals. And, even at funerals, we understandably tend to speak in very sentimental terms. But, the hope of heaven and eternal life is more than a comforting sentiment, more than a crutch to help us get through grief so that we can throw away the crutch until the next funeral or memorial service. Christian hope in the life to come is part of the foundation of a satisfying and productive life in Christ.

When work gets started on Kirk Hall, very soon, the contractor will spend time making certain that the

foundation is deep enough and strong enough and exactly in the right place. A building without a solid foundation develops all sorts of problems: ugly, cosmetic cracks appear, the floor itself will tilt, and an outside wall of brick or stone will crack and crumble. Some houses are condemned as unsafe for human habitation because the foundation is bad. In the same way, the hope that we will live eternally in Jesus Christ is an essential part of the foundation of a faithful life.

Fortunately, scripture does not promise eternal life on the basis of scientific or engineering foundations. Our hope grows out of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Because he lives, we can live today and beyond, abundantly and eternally. Part of that abundance is reunion with the people we love.

At the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation offers a vision of eternity built around the Lamb of God, the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. The whole book is a literal vision of a Christian leader named John who has been exiled to a Mediterranean island. There on the island, John has a dream, a revelation, or to use the technical term, he has an apocalypse that discloses the world to come.

There's good news and bad news for us who read Revelation today in the twenty-first century. The bad news is that we cannot decipher some of the symbols in this vision with any confidence. Almost certainly, Christian readers in the first century knew exactly what

John was writing about because his language referred to names as familiar to them as the name Black Cat Road is familiar to us. Two thousand years from now, no one may remember that Black Cat Road and Rt. 616 are exactly the same. We cannot recover the full meaning of the book Revelation. Those who try to use this book for a blueprint of the future are imagining things. That's the bad news.

The good news is that the broad purpose and outline of the book is clear, especially with a little help from historians of the period. John is writing to Christians who experience persecution. He writes symbolically for two reasons. First, he needs to communicate in code because the Roman persecutors are the main target of his criticisms. Second, he needs to write imaginatively so that his readers, hard-pressed Christians, will be inspired by his colorful language and word pictures.

Thus, he describes eternity with the new Jerusalem. Jewish and Gentile Christians alike knew that Jerusalem had been a wonder of the ancient world before the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD. The jewel of Jerusalem was the temple, first gloriously built by Solomon and then re-built even more ostentatiously by Herod. The verses that we did not read this morning tease our imagination with ornaments in the city that include jasper, gold, onyx, sapphire, emeralds, agate and carnelian. We anticipate a temple surpassing the beauty and majesty of Solomon's achievement. Then, John surprises us by saying, "I saw no temple in the city for its

Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (21:22)."

That should be welcome news for all those people who say they're not religious, only spiritual. The reason for a temple is to practice religion. Eternal life means direct access to God. No preachers, no Sunday School classes, no mortgage on Kirk Hall. There's a story about President Calvin Coolidge on vacation in Vermont. He answered the telephone one day and heard a man's voice telling him that the local postmaster had died. Coolidge was not an excitable man. He said, "OK. What does that have to do with me?" "I'd like to take his place," said the voice on the phone. "That's perfectly all right with me," replied the President, "If it's all right with the undertaker." * I like the idea that in heaven we can take our requests straight to the top, although we may get some funny answers.

Because heaven is so much more than we can imagine, eternal life is best described by what is not there. No temple and no need for the light of sun or moon because the glory of God lights up everything. And, there's nothing unclean. Many Christians have abandoned the notion of "unclean" things. Our permissive society means anything goes. Or, almost anything. We are beginning to recover that notion of unclean as we are told that hand-washing knocks out the flu virus, and locally grown produce avoids poisonous pesticides, and the best prevention for sexually transmitted disease is either monogamy or abstinence.

Eternity obliterates everything noxious, everything impure, and everything dangerous or evil. Even the inconvenience of church is gone.

What's left will be remarkably attractive to us in the twenty first century. Flowing through the middle of the holy city is a river of life, bright as crystal. You know, the epic battle of the bottled beverages today is not just between Pepsi and Coke. The new kid in the fight is bottled water. The only problem is that some bottled water, advertised as crystal pure, comes right out of the tap. And, every bottle requires that we use several times the amount of water it holds in order to make the plastic bottle itself. Drinking bottled water may or may not be good for our health, but it's not healthy for the environment. The river of life flowing through the city of God becomes a metaphor of the clean world we can only dream of having, world without oil spills, a world without acid rain, a world only God can make.

That's the central characteristic of eternity; it's a gift of God. Every year in the season of Easter we preachers try to find words to describe Jesus' resurrection and the promise of our own resurrection from the dead. Words fail us because there's nothing like it in our experience.

The vision of Revelation spins out scene after scene, image after image until we may feel like we're watching computer generated special effects with both Rembrandt and Picasso at the control board. Perhaps

that is the best comparison we can come up with. Life with God in the world to come features the excitement of the best action movie; the beauty of a jeweler like Faberge; the purity of finest water; and the justice that is so much more than what we deserve.

Justice in heaven is something many shy away from discussing because A) we don't really want to get what we each deserve, and B) we don't want to be judgmental or critical of other people, at least not in public. Perhaps this is the best kept secret of an eternity with the God we worship: Justice is meted out by our loving and merciful God. The judge is not vengeful or harsh while at the same time delivering verdicts that are absolutely fair. Fairness is achieved because the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. Moving from this life into the life to come means we pass through the filter of the cross. Sins are forgiven. Lives are redeemed. Wrongs are righted. We are made new. All this is of God.

I cannot begin to tell you exactly how this redemption happens. We can only say that it does happen and hint vaguely at the process. It has everything to do with the cross. It's powered by the resurrection. It's not mechanical, but is better described as an organic process that grows as faith and trust and hope and love grow in our hearts. We see the buds today in this world and we will see the full blooms in the world to come.

Most of what we've been talking about so far is features of eternity that any individual could enjoy – beauty, true justice, and purity – but that's not enough. Individual persons are not happy and fulfilled by themselves. That's what the Creator realized in the Garden of Eden. The book of Revelation is populated with the people of God. But, they are not exactly the people we might expect. There are certainly pillars of the church robed in white and singing praise songs. In this passage there are also kings of the earth and nations. As you may know, when the New Testament uses the word "nations," it means foreigners, those people beyond the pale. It's the same word translated as "Gentiles," the uncircumcised, those people considered unclean by traditional people of God. In other words, all the people of the world, Jews and Gentiles, will walk together by the light of God in the holy city.

When I was a teenager, I had fierce arguments with my father and mother about the Christian faith. Eventually I became a little more tolerant, but the humility to listen to them was much slower in coming. Eternal, resurrection life holds out the promise of peace, peace between parents and children, peace with our neighbors, and peace among the nations of the world. It is the contentment, the health, the shalom that we began longing for when we suckled at our mother's breast. It is a sentimental hope that laid the surest foundation for our idea of heaven at the beginning of our lives. And, it is the truest hope at the end of life. Lay hold of that hope. After all, we are going home.

* In Laugh, L.B. Flynn, p. 72.