

Sunday May 3, 2020

Lesson 10: The River of Life-giving Water

Scripture: Revelation 22: 1-5

Context:

The next set in our series focuses on grace, the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God. Through the next few weeks we will examine what is the grace of God and how grace plays a pivotal role in our Christian walk. The first lesson in grace takes us to the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

The scene in this last chapter is a beautiful one. The backdrop is the city where God dwells. In this city, a river flows from where the throne of God sits. In this urban planning though, there are trees planted in the city beside this river of God. The fruits on the trees are ripe each month and the leaves are for the healing of the nations. There are servants for God and there is no darkness, only light.

The author John is using an allusion to address the readers about the state of things and give them hope in the midst of persecution. Early Christianity was an urban religion, a faith focused upon establishing justice in the gates of the cities and witnessing to the faith amidst public life.¹ Throughout the Book of Revelation, John refers to seven different churches, all of them based in cities. For John, the city is the realization of human community, the concrete living out of interdependence as a part of human life.² Humans all have individual lives and yet there are times in which humans must depend on others for different tasks.

John uses the city metaphor to help the people understand how important community is to the foundation of their faith. A community does not necessarily depend on its streets, architecture, or walls. A community is made up of people and John's imagery of the city of God provides for his conviction of how God's final dwelling place is in and with God's people.³ God is not distant. God is with God's people.

For John the allusion also helps the early Christian church understand the diversity within the people of God. He uses the terms "peoples" and nations specifically to help God's chosen people understand the radical nature of God's inclusivity.⁴ This is not to be a distant future construction activity. John writes to emphasize how God is to dwell in the here and the now.

Application

Often when people read this passage in the Book of Revelation, they portray the city as something for the future. This celestial city is what we will see when we die; it is

¹ M. Eugene Boring, "Revelation," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 219.

² Ibid., 219.

³ Ibid., 219.

⁴ Ibid., 222.

the place where God dwells with the saints. Some interpretations might even suggest this is the outcome of “the end of time.”

Yet if we look at the rest of the context of John’s writing, we see this fits into a bigger narrative for the churches John was addressing. John lived in a chaotic world. Rome was the imperial power and their reach never ceased to amaze the people of the Mediterranean. They heard the reports of debauched emperors and the heavy-handed politics of the Roman senate. At times, the Roman Empire would seek minority groups to threaten and make an example of before the subjugated nations. The Christians were a quickly developing minority group who had clashed with the empire. Fear was everywhere.

John wants the people of the Christian church though not to waver in their faith and their practice. The allusions of his book are meant not tell of the end times, but to remind the people of how God is with them in their pain. More importantly, the Holy Spirit is at work within the people of God so they may be who God has called them to be. This does not exempt them from pain, suffering, martyrdom, or death. Those things will still happen. Yet the Lord will give them the balm for their souls.

When we read of this city of God, we are not to imagine just what will happen when we die. Instead, God invites us to look at where we live today and to see glimpses of the Lord’s celestial city in the midst of our community. God is at work in the midst of our communities in the here and the now.

Even if you do not live in a city, you can appreciate the power of John’s allusion of community. When you are in a strong community, there is a sense of people sharing life with one another. They realize that while everyone needs their own independence in their own areas of life, there are other areas where they need other people.

Just as we receive grace from God through the cross, we receive grace in this life we lead today. Grace in community is where we realize God has created to live with one another and share our gifts and our time. One of the ways we respond to God’s grace is seeking to share our life with those around us in ways which encourage and give others hope.

Even in the midst of this pandemic we find ourselves in, I think we have realized the importance of community. While we may not be able to embrace one another or spend quality time together, we understand how we are social creatures meant to share life with one another. And so we have found the ways whether it is intentionally picking up groceries for the neighbor who has a comprised immune system or making creative masks for friends to wear to the grocery store. We might be a little more intentional than the constant Zoom meetings to call a friend and fully check in. During this time we might have learned to extend grace to others who are struggling and hopefully we have given grace to ourselves.

In the city of God, we are reminded how God has given us grace to live each day renewed and replenished. The city includes a diverse group of people God has made, each with their own gifts and talents. God is calling for us to see God’s dwelling place is with all the people of God, who God has made in God’s image. Just as God nourishes our individual souls with the water of our Lord, God expects for us to nourish the souls of those who live beside us and also allow them to nourish our souls.

What does grace mean to you? How can you live in the city of God today sharing with others? What gifts has God given you to share? How do you nourish others? How do

you allow others to nourish your soul?

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