

The Holy City
November 1, 2009
(All Saints' Day)
Revelation 21: 1-6a
St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Almost four years ago, our whole family drove up to Waco so that I could be interviewed by the Vestry of St. Alban's.

The purpose of this interview was to discern if I was to be your rector.

I remember that our family left Houston after school was out, and we drove up to Waco that night.

Coming up Highway 6, we passed through Hearne then Calvert, Marlin and Reisel. Soon after we passed the speed trap known as Reisel, the highway made a bend to the left.

And as Highway 6 curved, we were on top of a slight bluff, so that you could look down upon the lights of the city of Waco.

The city lights of Waco shimmered in a vision of golden points of light as the city stretched out below us.

When I saw this nighttime vision of the city of Waco laid out in front of us, I knew in my heart that this shimmering city was a vision of our new home.

And now, whenever I drive up Highway 6 and see that vision of the shimmering lights of Waco, I know that I am almost home.

In the book of Revelation, John writes about a vision.

In John's vision, he sees a new heaven and a new earth – and he sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down as a gift from heaven.

In John's vision, he sees a city.

When people talk about what their vision of heaven is like,

Some folks envision heaven as a peaceful and restful place, with golden harps and rolling streams and green pastures.

Yet in the book of Revelation, John's vision of heaven is different.

According to John, heaven is not a rural country farm or a quiet retreat center.

No, according to John, the new Jerusalem is a busy, active, urban city.

Of course, no one has truly seen heaven and come back to tell us about it.

Therefore, this does not mean that John's vision of heaven is correct, and that your vision of heaven is incorrect.

But since John's vision is in the Bible and your vision of heaven is not, then John's vision is the one we are going to go with this morning.

And according to St. John's Revelation, he saw a new heaven and a new earth - and he saw a city.

The book of Revelation is probably the most misinterpreted and abused book in the whole Bible.

Some folks would just as soon get rid of the book of Revelation.

Yet John's vision in Revelation is important.

John's vision is important because it shows us our destination.

John's vision show us where we are going to end up.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us that in the beginning, there is God.

And in the beginning, there are just two humans, in a Garden.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, tells us that in the end, there is God.

And in the end, there will be hundreds and thousands of people, living in a City.

Therefore, the beginning and the end of our Scriptures tell us that our human story begins in a Garden – and ends in a City.

Here at St. Alban's, we have a long history of catching early glimpses of this vision for God's holy City.

Over 50 years ago, Joe Ward, Jr. and his wife, Martha, were one of the first families who moved from St. Paul's Episcopal Church to start St. Alban's.

In fact, Joe's mother, Camille Ward, was the woman who carved the cross that now hangs over our altar.

Sadly, Joe Ward died last Thursday and we will bury this saint tomorrow.

Now even though Joe Ward was in his 90s and mostly blind, I had several opportunities to visit with Joe in his home.

Joe told me many stories about this city of Waco and about how he humbly played a part in making this city more closely resemble the holy city of God.

Joe told me amazing stories about he and a few other men quietly approached leaders in the African American community in Waco during the early 1960s.

Joe worked behind the scenes as a bridge between the blacks and whites of Waco during a time when civil unrest and riots were unfolding across the South.

Because of their vision for this city, Joe and his friends, both black and white, were able to bring about the peaceful integration of the restaurants and movie theaters and swimming pools in this city.

Joe Ward, who was among the very few who founded this church, saw a vision of a new city:

A city where both blacks and whites eat at the same lunch counter, without riots and violence.

You see, our human story begins in a Garden – but it ends in a City.

And this tradition of visionary action continues at St. Alban's Episcopal Church today, as we step out and open our holy doors to this city.

Last Friday, we had almost 100 Hispanic parents and children in our parish hall, dressed up as clowns and angels, for the fall carnival for Avance.

Avance educates mothers and their children in our church facilities, each Monday through Thursday morning, as the buildings of St. Alban's are being used to bring success to students and parents in our city.

Camp Fire USA, who ministers from the second floor of our Outreach Center, is building a vegetable garden and a compost pile on the plot of land behind our Outreach Center.

The land of St. Alban's is being used to teach children in this city how to grow and recycle their own food.

St. Alban's goes out to Provident Heights Elementary School, giving their students backpacks filled with school supplies last August.

And because the gates of the holy city seen by St. John are always open, day and night,

We open the doors of St. Alban's for meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and for Centering Prayer and for Children's Theater classes and for violin lessons and for the Christian Women's Job Corps banquet.

We are saints in this city because St. Alban's Episcopal Church believes that our human story began in a Garden, but it ends in a City.

And in your everyday lives, all of you show this city of Waco a glimpse of that holy City seen by St. John in his Revelation.

You work and teach in our schools, against incredible odds, because just one more child who can read is a triumph for this city.

You practice law and medicine and business with fairness and honesty because you know that a river of healing and justice flows from the holy City.

You work with your hands and you parent and you serve and you love your neighbor because the holy City seen by John is filled with a multitude of people from every people and language and nation.

You, the people in these pews, are saints in this city – because you know that our human story begins in a Garden, but it ends in a City.

On this All Saints' Day, we recognize that all of us in these pews today are saints of God.

And we know where the saints of God are going to end up – we are going to end up in the holy city:

A city where there is no more racial discrimination or poverty or illiteracy or hunger or illness or closed gates.

And since we know where we are going,

We open doors for the poor and women and people of color.

We give money to the hungry and the underemployed.

We practice justice and healing and forgiveness –

All so this city of Waco can more closely resemble that holy city seen by John.

You see, we are the saints of God, coming 'round the bend in the highway.

We see the shimmering lights of the holy city laid before us.

We are almost home.

For our story ends...in a City.

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2009