

Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Michael A. Bird Transcript

“Oh That’s Heaven”

“You cannot be separated from the tree of life in God’s kingdom.” At Holy Eucharist at Trinity Church Wall Street, the Rev. Michael Bird preached on the Book of Revelation, a book he says tells a hopeful story of abundance, of welcome, and of healing. Father Michael warns us not to make the mistake of thinking that the scripture is only about the future. The heavenly city can happen now, if we begin by concentrating on and lifting up that vision of community. Watch the sermon. The readings are Acts 16:9–15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5;, and John 14:23–29.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the true and living God, Father, son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

My mother-in-law has this phrase she uses, I've heard it for about 35 years now, so I'm very familiar with it. She says, that's Heaven. For a very long time, decades, I wasn't sure that's Heaven means, you've fallen short, but I'm going to pretend or better luck next time, or it will be okay. But at that's Heaven has been part of our family story for a very long time. In recent years, my mother-in-law now in her nineties, well experiences dementia as an integral part of her daily life. What's very true and very clear is that, that's Heaven has not gone away. But that's Heaven is now all about joy and gratitude and excitement. I mean I hope that will be true for me one day when I get to have ice cream anytime I've wanted. That's Heaven. The grandchildren come to visit. That's Heaven. The reading that we have today from the revelation to Saint John the Divine is, well, let's all about heaven. It's about this vision of heaven. It's about the new Jerusalem coming down to be part of the day-to-day existence. It's about the possibility of what a city can be, what a city of God will be. There's this great moment where John is whisked up to a great high mountain and we know from all the Bible stories that have gone before that one is sent to a great high mountain because one can see unadulterated a clear vision. God's purposes, and a clear vision of our potential. John is whisked up to this great high mountain and he looks down and he sees the city coming down and the city in so many ways speaks to who we are now and who we seek to be, who we want to be. This city coming down from heaven, this new Jerusalem is all about community. And the verses that we don't get this morning, but they're in there.

It's tough when you get to the last chapter, the last book of the Bible and they cut bits out. In the parts that we don't get. We see that this city is built on 12 foundations, each with its own meaning, each symbolizing community. We hear that the city has 12 Gates. This square city with four sides, three gates on each side. Each gate is a real Pearl that is always open to welcome people in. Each gate has an angel beside it not to say no, not you, but to welcome in those who have been touched by love, inspired by

love and who seek deeper community. This city surrounded by a great high wall that for some fields like community and security. But in this case, deliberately open that all the nations might enter. This revelation to Saint John the Divine also gives us this other image. It's my very favorite part of it. This water flowing from the throne of the Lamb down through the main street of the city. This crystal clear water of life, which for a people who live in a semi-arid climate, speaks volumes for us who are bathed in humidity today, maybe a little less so. But nevertheless, this vision of this crystal clear river flowing through the city and on each side is a tree of life. And when we hear tree of life, we remember that Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden encountered the tree of life, but there was only one. But in the New Jerusalem, there are two. You cannot be separated from the tree of life in God's kingdom. And each tree of life bears fruit constantly 12 months of fruit, so that no one goes wanting. And the leaves from the tree of life on each side of this river grant healing and reconciliation to all. In this revelation granted to Saint John the divine, we have a sense of community and possibility. We have a call to healing and reconciliation. And we also have the gift of vision for in this kingdom, in this heaven, there is no need for lamps, there is no need for sun or moon because the light comes from our God, the radiant love of our God and the Lamb at the throne. And we can see it all. And as we look at one another, we recognize the love of God and the imprint of God because in heaven it is marked on our foreheads and just in a couple of weeks when we do baptisms at Pentecost in this church, at this service, we will mark on the foreheads of those being baptized that they are marked as Christ's own forever.

In this new Jerusalem, in this heaven, we will see God face-to-face. And for all of you biblical scholars like that's not a thing. Seeing God face to face is just too much for us to handle. Moses had to be tucked away so that God might pass by and even then, it did wonders to his hairdo. In the person of Jesus Christ, we are given the incarnate God. But this vision of the New Jerusalem, this heaven to be lays it all there. And because we are attuned to love, we can see it all. There's a danger in this passage, and the danger is that's then and this is now. So I'm not going to sweat now. I'll just wait for them. But there's deeply embedded in grained woven into the teaching of Jesus that the kingdom of God is already. That there are glimpses of the heavenly kingdom, glimpses of the New Jerusalem. If we just squint a little bit and look for it. I spent a lot of time and this is my own failings. I own it publicly. I spent a lot of time, particularly as we continue to receive news about death and destruction, our propensity for violence and dissolution and separation. I spent a lot of time thinking about what's wrong. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with the world? What's wrong with those people over there? But the gift that we have in the reading for today is the antithesis of asking the question what's wrong? Instead, it begs the question, what's right? Recognizing that we have been given everything that we need through the self offering of Jesus Christ. We can look at the world with those eyes and those frames and ask what's right and begin to build from there. Today we will raise a flag outside of the front of this church. The Episcopal churches flag will come down and the pride flag will go up.

Actually, it's the progress flag, but I'll talk about that in announcements. That flag is a manifestation of so much that was wrong. But at this time, so much that is right because we have chosen to come together to love one another, to care for one another, to suffer next to one another in the name of Jesus Christ. I've spent the last two days in meetings with our congregational counsel, our subcommittee and ministry group chairs, beginning to ask big questions coming out of the pandemic. What is church and

how do we share the love we have been given to the world? What is right? And how can we build from that? On this day, we will recognize the 50th anniversary in marriage of Jamie and Marry Chilton Calloway. 50 years. Do you know that's a 100 years of marriage experience in one family? What's right? And how do we lift that up? We have been given the gift of a vision of a new Jerusalem and we have been given a commandment to love one another and help to make that happen so it doesn't feel so far away. And we have been given signs and moments of what is right that we might build from those and be the community, the Church family, the people of God that we are called to be out in the world. I'll sum it up in three words. That's heaven.

Amen.