

Creating the Holy City
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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At the Healing Our City Interfaith Service that took place three days after the Boston Marathon Bombing, Old South's Senior Minister Nancy Taylor spoke incredibly moving words. She proclaimed, "And from the church's tower, this is what I saw that day—I saw people run toward, not away from, toward the explosions, toward the chaos, toward the mayhem, toward the danger, making of their own bodies sacraments of mercy . . . we are shaken, but we are not forsaken." [1]

We are shaken, but we are not forsaken is such an honest and hopeful way to think about these events. It also describes the early Christian communities in Asia Minor at the time of the Book of Revelation's writing. John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, was exiled on an island because of his Christian faith. On Patmos he supposedly has some visions of an epic battle of good versus evil and puts these visions down in writing in what would become the final book of our Bible. John's visions are crazy and sometimes a bit disturbing. But today's image of this New Jerusalem, this Holy City, is one of the most poignant images in our Bible. The Holy City shows the full restoration of God, humanity, and all of creation dwelling together in peace and harmony for eternity.

Actually, for anyone who thinks The Book of Revelation is irrelevant for Progressive Christians because of all the Left Behind novels and end of the world predictions that some people use it for, I'd encourage you to take a closer look. In its pages are some of the most ardent critiques of imperial ideology, militarism, and commerce. The whole book is a critique of the Roman Empire—in fact of all empires that seek to keep any group powerless and under control. Yet the book is wrapped up in symbols like dragons, beasts, and many-eyed monsters to urge the faithful onward and give us courage when we feel terrorized. In order to keep Christians safe in case the Romans ever got their hands on the writing, it's full of these symbols and codes that only the faithful would have fully understood. [2]

The Book of Revelation encouraged the Christian community to stay strong when persecuted under Roman Emperors Nero and Domitian in particular. Today's passage from Chapter 21 is most often read at Funerals and Memorial Services because it proclaims, "God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." [3] These words were a moving sentiment for the shaken but not forsaken Christians in John of Patmos' day. And they're just as powerful for all of us who are shaken but not forsaken now as we mourn losses or process difficult and tragic events in our lives and in our communities.

There are differing views about our role and God's role in the creation of the New Jerusalem. Is Revelation Chapter 21 about the future or the present or somehow both? Are we supposed to stand back and pray for this New Jerusalem? Are we supposed to create this New Jerusalem on earth ourselves so God can come and dwell with humanity forever? Or should we be co-creating the Holy City with God by our sides while also praying for the day when God will fully make all things new? I tend to believe in the final viewpoint—I don't think we should stand back and wait for God to do all the work of restoration and ignore our tasks in the present, but I also don't think we can do the work alone either.

Thinking we can create the New Jerusalem solely by ourselves reminds me of the poem "God's Wheel" by Shel Silverstein. The poem reads, "God says to me with kind of a smile, 'Hey how would you like to be God awhile and steer the world?' 'Okay,' says I, 'I'll give it a try. Where do I

set? How much do I get? What time is lunch? When can I quit?' 'Gimme back that wheel,' says God, 'I don't think you're quite ready yet.'"[4]

When you think about it, if we want to create a world where all things are made new, then we need God's help to do it. This is a faith in action or prayer in motion moment where we recognize that we're not God and not capable, as the poem presents in a funny way, of taking over God's wheel and steering the world on our own. But we're also not helpless bystanders when we see death and pain and mourning either.

Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr tells a great story about the legacy of Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Mother Teresa never tried to convert a Muslim or a Hindu to the Catholic faith as she worked among the people for all those years in India. She actually once told the sisters of her order "that their job was not to talk about Jesus or even promote Jesus, but to be Jesus!"[5] So when we hear this passage about the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, I think our job is to pray for this moment when God will somehow, someday fully dwell among us and also work to heal the wounds of our world now. To work for a world where the first things have passed away. To not just talk about Jesus or even promote Jesus, but to be Jesus and walk in his ways of love. It's certainly a good start.

After the Boston Marathon Bombing there was a quote from Mr. Rogers that was all over the internet, perhaps you read it too. Fred Rogers, who was a Presbyterian Minister you may recall, once famously said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world."[6]

It's not hard to find the helpers in these recent events. There were the first responders that were on the scene within seconds it seemed—EMTs, doctors, and nurses rose to the occasion to care for the injured. Boston police helped keep things calm and did some crowd control. There were the runners themselves, many who crossed the finish line and went onto Mass General to donate blood. There were ordinary residents along the Marathon course who opened their homes for people to rest, get food and water, call their families if they could get through, and recover from such a terrifying moment.

There was Dr. Adrienna Wald who brought 30 of her UMass Boston nursing students onto the scene to treat those with serious wounds. There was former New England Patriots lineman Joe Andruzzi who literally carried a wounded woman in his arms away from the scene. Google set up a person finder application on the day of the Marathon to help folks find anyone who was missing.[7]

Mayor Tom Menino and Governor Deval Patrick set up One Fund Boston to help victims of the tragedy by making it easier for individuals and corporations to donate money to cover medical expenses. As of this past Tuesday, the fund had already raised \$20 million.[8] There was the picture of a policeman in Watertown who had two gallons of milk in his hands to give to a family with young children who ran out of milk during the lockdown of the city. And there was the Islamic Society of Boston who contacted the FBI and offered to speak to the suspects, to attempt to convince them to turn themselves in peacefully.

All of these helpers, these caring people in our communities, made the tragedy perhaps a little easier to bear. These helpers show us so vividly the light in the darkness, and that the darkness cannot overcome it. These helpers give us a glimpse of what the New Jerusalem will be like one day. By their actions, they also help create the Holy City now.

In thinking about what lessons can be learned from these helpers, pediatrician Dr. Claire McCarthy wrote a great blog post lifting up all of these acts of compassion. She encourages parents to speak to their children about the events by framing them around the helpers we can so easily see. She advises parents to, "Talk about those helpers, those people who ran to the scene. Or the people who opened up their homes, the restaurants who fed people or the doctors and nurses who rushed to their hospitals to help. Talk about how all of us can be helpers to each other, in little ways as well as big ways. Model being a helper: offer to help carry groceries for someone, cook a meal (or make a get-well-soon card) for a sick neighbor, volunteer for a playground clean up, bring food to a food pantry. Even simple things, like holding the door for someone or asking if you can help someone who looks lost or upset, are important." [9]

As much as we may wholeheartedly pray for this vision of the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, to become a reality one day, we need to help create it now. We are supposed to be the helpers, the caring people in the world. After all in Rob Bell's new book *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* he says, "I believe God isn't backward-focused—opposed to reason, liberation, and progress—but instead is pulling us and calling us and drawing all of humanity forward—as God always has—into greater and greater peace, love, justice, connection, honesty, compassion, and joy." [10] God is pulling us and calling us and drawing us forward toward the Holy City where death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more—for the first things have passed away.

May it be so one day and may we help to create the Holy City now. Amen.

[1] Rev. Nancy Taylor, Reflection from the Healing Our City Service, April 18, 2013 <http://www.oldsouth.org/news/healing-our-city>

[2] "Introduction to the Revelation of John" in *The Peoples' Bible*, NRSV, 1721.

[3] Revelation 21:3-4.

[4] Shel Silverstein, "God's Wheel," in *A Light in the Attic*, 152.

[5] Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 100.

[6] The Fred Rogers Company, <http://www.fci.org/new-site/par-tragic-events.html>

[7] <http://mentalfloss.com/article/50138/look-helpers-10-heroes-boston-marathon-tragedy>

[8] Ira Kantor, "One Fund Boston Raises \$20M," *The Boston Herald*, Tuesday April 23, 2013, http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/local_coverage/2013/04/one_fund_boston_raises_20m

[9] Dr. Claire McCarthy, "Moving forward after the Boston Marathon bombings: advice for parents," MD Mama Blog, http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/health/mdmama/2013/04/moving_forward_after_the_boston_marathon_bombings_advice_for_parents.html

[10] Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, 19.