

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 16, 2004**

**Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel**

**Revelation 21:9-19a,21-23**

*<sup>9</sup> One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." <sup>10</sup> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. <sup>11</sup> It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup> It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>13</sup> There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. <sup>14</sup> The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*

*<sup>15</sup> The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. <sup>16</sup> The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. <sup>17</sup> He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. <sup>18</sup> The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. <sup>19</sup> The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone... <sup>21</sup> The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.*

*<sup>22</sup> I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. <sup>23</sup> The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. (NIV)*

**The City of God As It Will Be and As It Is**

"A picture is worth a thousand words." So goes the old saying. And it's true. If you want to communicate something quickly and with maximum impact, use a picture. We've witnessed the power of pictures in the last few weeks: photos of flag-draped caskets, photos from Abu Ghraib prison.

Today we want to look at another picture. Would it be alright if it were a picture of a completely different sort than the ones I just mentioned? This is

a word picture from the book of Revelation. The Apostle John, late in his life, was shown a vivid picture in a vision. He saw a city, a city of such beauty that it can hardly be described in words. John, though, did put into words what he saw, and that word picture is what we want to look at today.

First of all, we should know what we're looking at. The book of Revelation, you remember, is John's written record of a series of visions that Jesus gave him. In these visions, which contain some fantastic and often frightening images, Jesus is letting us in on things we would not have realized. He's revealing to us what is happening right now in the world from a spiritual perspective. And his main point in giving us these pictures is to make us aware of the deadly dangers to our lives and faith that exist in the world, and to assure us that he is with us no matter what, protecting us with his love and finally bringing us to glory.

That's true in chapter 21, which we are looking at today. In this vision, John sees a city, called Jerusalem. Now, is this vision describing the literal city of Jerusalem? It is not. How do we know? John tells us: One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." What we're looking at in this vision is "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." What is that? Well, the Lamb is Jesus (we discussed that a couple weeks ago; see also John 1:29). And who is his bride? St. Paul helps us out on that; listen to what he says in Ephesians: Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word. (Ephesians 5:25,26) "The bride" is a picturesque way of describing the church, which is the group of all people everywhere who believe in Jesus. This group is described elsewhere in the Bible as God's family, God's household, as the body of Jesus (Jesus himself is called the Head). And here in Revelation, the Holy Christian Church, the group of all people of all time, is described as a city.

So, in this picture that is worth many words, let's see today what Jesus is telling us about this group that you and I are parts of: his family, the Church. Let's see what Jesus tells us about the Church, the City of God, as it will be in the future and as it is now. To do that, we will look at a few aspects of John's vision: gates, foundation, walls, beauty, presence and light.

### **Gates**

John is looking at a vision describing what the family of God, the Christian Church, will look like at the end of time, when Jesus returns in glory. In short, it's magnificent. We see the gates of the city. John writes: <sup>10</sup> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... <sup>12</sup> It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On

the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>13</sup> There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west...<sup>21</sup> The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.

Angels guard the gates. This probably tells us that no one goes in this city without God's authorization. Remember the garden of Eden, the idyllic home of Adam and Eve? When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, he banished them from paradise and posted angels at the gates to bar entrance. No one could enter and eat of the Tree of Life.

Here, at the gates of the city of God, are similar angels. So how can anybody get past them? A clue lies in the names written on the gates.

The names of the twelve tribes of Israel—the Old Testament clans descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—are on the twelve gates. The twelve tribes were God's family in Old Testament times. God, purely out of his love, chose these people to be his own. God showered them with special gifts. And he communicated with them, telling them that someone was coming from their bloodline who would deliver the world from its rebellion against him and from all the destruction and death that rebellion brought with it. By trusting this promise, God's people of old were saved.

Now the names of the twelve tribes make a reappearance on the gates of the glorified city of God. What does this tell us? Does it mean that only people in the bloodline of Abraham, that is, ethnic Jewish people, will end up in heaven? No. The Bible tells us that all who believe in God's promise as Abraham did—and we're talking about the promise of a Savior, a Messiah here—are, in essence, descendants of Abraham. The Apostle Paul tells us that we are children of Abraham, even though we aren't ethnically Jewish. That's because, just like the Israelites of old, we trust God's promise centered in a Jew named Jesus. See what the names on the gates mean? Just like the faithful Israelites of old, we believe this good news: Jesus Christ, the descendant of Abraham, takes away our sin, wipes away the record of our rebellion against God. Because of Jesus, the angel bars the gate no more. By faith in Jesus, the Savior descended from Israel, we enter the city of God, his family. We come from north, south, east, and west, from every nation, tribe, people and language, drawn by the love of Christ Jesus. And all of us will one day be glorified as is this shining city.

### ***Foundation***

Next, the foundation of the city: <sup>14</sup> The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb...<sup>19</sup> The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone...

The city is built on priceless foundations. On these twelve foundations are written the names of Christ's apostles. What's the significance here? Again, we look to the book of Ephesians for help: Consequently, you are no longer

foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2: 19,20) The picture is this: the things that the apostles (like Matthew, John, Paul) wrote down for us about Jesus—these words are what our faith is built on. We trust the message God gives us: that because Jesus lived for us, suffered the punishment that we deserved, died in our place, then rose back to life—because Jesus did these things, we are washed clean from our guiltiness in God's sight and adopted as his children and heirs.

Oh, we could build on other things. Confidence that we will enter the city of God—we could build it on our own efforts. But what kind of a foundation is that? Every day we fail God. No, we forget ourselves and look only to Jesus. He is, as the apostles have told us, our one, sure foundation.

### ***Walls***

The walls of the city: The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls... He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using.<sup>18</sup> The wall was made of jasper...

In Bible times, why would you have put a wall around a city? For protection. For security. A wall protected the city's people from assaults by invaders. The wall of the city John sees would certainly do that; it measures 144 cubits thick—that's 216 feet! What's the point of showing a city with a heavy-duty wall? To depict security and safety. When God's church is glorified, it will be safe from all who would harm it. Remember the words we heard last week: There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4) Death, pain, sin and all the grief it brings with it—these things won't be able to touch us.

But what about now? Can we have any security now? The answer is Yes; real security is to be found in God's city, in his family. Do you want to know whether God accepts you or not? Then listen to what he says through his people: he loved you and forgave you before you ever knew him. Do you want to be sure that God cares about you? Then listen to what he says through his people, his Church: He cared about you so much that he sent his Son to do the unthinkable to bring you real peace. The Church says what Jesus says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

### ***Beauty***

If you were having a new home built, how would the contractor react if you made this request: "Instead of using concrete for the foundation, I was thinking of using diamonds instead. You know, big ones, fit together snugly." He'd think you were crazy. But look at the city in John's vision: The

foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone [then he goes on to list them]... The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

Did you notice the measurements of this city John describes? The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. Perfect symmetry. A perfect cube. (If your memory of the Old Testament is good, by the way, you'll remember that a perfect cube was the shape of the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.) The point is this: when the family of God, his city, the Church, is glorified, it will be the most beautiful group of people you've ever seen.

But what about now? What does this group of people look like now? Beautiful? On some days, maybe. But all of us here can get ugly, too. I don't mean physical appearance. We can get ugly in the way we talk about each other and to each other. Ugly in our attitudes toward each other—and toward God himself. The city of God on earth, the family of God, doesn't look good much of the time. Ugliness is more the rule than beauty.

But we shouldn't let appearances fool us. In reality, the people in the city of God, people like you and me who are part of God's family, are beautiful. To God, we are flawless. Not because we've cleaned ourselves up so well, because we've made ourselves look good to him. No, we can't do that. So God has done it for us. He has simply declared that we are beautiful in his sight because Jesus Christ washed us clean from every stain. See what this means? We should view one another and ourselves (even the cranky and annoying among us) the way God views us—as his beautiful creations. Our sinfulness makes it hard, but beautiful is what we really are.

### ***Presence***

God is present in this city that John sees, and he is present directly. I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. In the old city of Jerusalem, if you wanted contact with God, you went to the Temple. There God was present, blessing people with his grace, speaking to them through the Scriptures and through the sacrifices that bled on the altar. But people never saw God's face. He was present through the things that went on at the Temple. When the people of God are glorified, however, God will be present among them directly. No more Temple; it won't be needed. Then we will see God face to face.

That's a difference between the future and now. We don't see God's face now. Does that mean that he's not here? No. He is. Sometimes we begin our services with the words, "We have come into God's presence." Notice that when Pastor Janke and I say that, we don't make quotation marks in the air when we say it! We're not just playing make believe here. God is really here

among us. He is here when the Scriptures are read. He is here in the Sacrament of the Altar. And when we hear his Word and receive his Supper, we are getting a sneak preview of the fact that we will one day see Jesus face to face.

### ***Light***

The last verse we look at expresses the same truth: The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The light God provides, the hope, the life—we will experience it directly one day. God's immediate presence will bring us light and life and joy forever.

Yet even now we have light. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, is here among us. When our lives get dark, he is there to shine on us. Even when the darkness of death looms over us, Jesus, the one who died and rose again, is there to say, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will never die." Jesus is light and life.

Do you get the picture? This group of people, the people of God, the church of God, the city of God, this group that God has made you and me a part of—we are destined for beauty and unbreakable security and light and enjoying the presence of God. Won't it be wonderful?

Oh, wait. Beauty and security and light and the presence of God? Instead of asking, "*Won't it be wonderful?*" I should ask, "*Isn't it wonderful?*"

Amen.