

May 9, 2010  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

## ***REVIEWS OF HEAVEN***

It caught my eye. *Reviews of Heaven*. To my knowledge no one has been to heaven and returned to write a review. Look further and you find that these are reviews of a new book by the religion editor of *Newsweek*, Lisa Miller. Her recent book is getting a lot of press. It's titled: *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*.

One reviewer noted that his views of heaven aren't so far from those of his three-year old daughter who got her theology from a children's book called *Dog Heaven*. Isn't heaven a place you go after you die? A place where you are reunited with your loved ones, and maybe even pets?

Another review of *Heaven* makes the point that even atheists regard the sweet hereafter as one of the least harmful of religious ideas. It's like a soothing blanket for the bereaved. But don't forget: it has often been used to control and intimidate the faithful. Puritans thought of heaven less as a comfort than as a way to impose discipline in this life. All the references to St. Peter and his VIP list at the pearly gates reflect some people's desire to do or buy anything to obtain a Get-Out-of-Hell-Free card for them and their loved ones!

Obviously the concept of heaven developed over centuries. But it wasn't always, quoting from another review, "the kumbaya holiday camp" it has become today.

If I were to ask you what kind of images you have of heaven, some of them would likely be from the book of Revelation, the source for our second readings this Easter season. Saints in white robes with palm branches in their hands. Multitudes and multitudes offering worship to God. Angel choirs. The Lamb at the center of everything. And the end of all tears and grief.

The last two Sundays we've reflected on the Lamb and making all things new. Today: heaven as a city, a primary image in Revelation. The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

We may be urban animals. Holy Trinity describes itself as having a "heart for the city, and a passion for justice." Many of us love Chicago and love the big city. But cities have a mixed reputation--in the Bible, in literature and in the daily news. A city is considered the apex of human civilization. But it is also condemned as the locus of all that is wrong with the human race: greed, crime, pollution and violence. Most people would probably prefer to use images from nature to describe heaven than the realities of the city.

I have been reading a biography of Chicago by Dominic Pacyga. Preachers saw Chicago's great fire of 1871 as God's punishment on the city's many sins: greed, prostitution, and bounteous saloons. Some saw the fire as expunging the cancer from this new Sodom and Gomorrah. I remember hearing that kind of thinking from some well-known preachers in recent years! From the very beginning it seems Chicago was plagued with distrust between ethnic groups. Racial strife. Corruption. Urban chaos. Al Capone and gangsters.

The author of Revelation is contrasting the city of God with the evil and oppressive Roman empire. Rome—or most empires, for that matter—is not the eternal power it claims to be, but a demonic beast that oppresses the world. Which city will be our vision for this earth: Babylon or the city of God?

Barbara Rossing, a professor at our Lutheran seminary in Hyde Park, has written a book on Revelation called *The Rapture Exposed*. She says that John of Patmos, author of the Revelation, takes us on a tour of God's beloved city in the last two chapters of the book. Think of it as a travel guidebook. God lives in the city. Here on earth. There is no temple for God lives right among the people. There are no streetlights. Sunlight and moonlight are not needed. The glory of God is light enough.

And this is not a gated community. The doors aren't locked. We may put up walls to keep out foreigners and immigrants but into this city process all the nations of the world. There are no boundaries! And creation is honored and revered. The river of God flows through the city with the water of life for all: for people, for animals, for all creation.

The tree of life is in the city—I imagine it in a great, park-like green space--and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. The leaves are like medicine, healing the world, healing the wounds of the earth, healing the hurts of our hearts.

The 2010 World Expo, formerly called the World's Fair, just opened this past week in Shanghai. This year's theme is "Better City, Better Life." It reflects humankind's desire for better living in future urban environments. In 1800, only two percent of the human population lived in cities; by 2000, about half of the world had moved into cities.

Is the vision of the city of God in Revelation about the future or the present? Certainly both, but most people would tell you that heaven is a place you go when you die, or at least a state of mind after death.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said it's OK to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here and children who are starving. He said that it's OK to talk about the New Jerusalem, but one day God's preacher must talk about the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Memphis.

What might the new Chicago look like? What is God's dream for our city? God's dream for ministry in this congregation? This past week our social ministry committee met. How inspiring it was to hear of all the ways that members of this congregation and other faithful are serving the people in this city. Distributing food at the Lakeview Pantry. Serving meals at the Lakeview Shelter. Standing up for homeless youth through the Lakeview Action Coalition. Welcoming refugees through Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Ministries. Providing hospitality on the street through the Night Ministry. Making this earth a heaven by cleaning up trash and even caring for homeless dogs and cats.

Life in the city can be stressful. There are all kinds of things that fill us with fear, anxiety or isolation. Yet Jesus gives us the gift of peace that the world cannot give. Though Jesus leaves his disciples after the resurrection, he promises to come to them, not only in some future heaven, but in the here and now. "I am coming to you," he promises.

And come, he does. To the city. To Lakeview. To this assembly. Easter comes to us. Heaven comes to us as we worship this day. This is our New Jerusalem, our New Chicago. The glory of God is our light. And our lamp is the Lamb, Jesus the Christ.

If you feel inspired to write a review of heaven, describe what happens as we worship in this place. And then go on to talk about the ways the people of God serve in the city we love.