

## **Reconnecting the Grace-full Body: Streets of Gold Need More than Wax Revelation 21:10-21**

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*He took me in a Spirit-inspired trance to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. <sup>11</sup> The city had God's glory. Its brilliance was like a priceless jewel, like jasper that was as clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup> It had a great high wall with twelve gates. By the gates were twelve angels, and on the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel's sons. <sup>13</sup> There were three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. <sup>14</sup> The city wall had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the Lamb's twelve apostles.*

*<sup>15</sup> The angel who spoke to me had a gold measuring rod with which to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. <sup>16</sup> Now the city was laid out as a square. Its length was the same as its width. He measured the city with the rod, and it was fifteen hundred miles. Its length and width and height were equal. <sup>17</sup> He also measured the thickness of its wall. It was two hundred sixteen feet thick, as a person—or rather, an angel—measures things. <sup>18</sup> The wall was built of jasper, and the city was pure gold, like pure glass. <sup>19</sup> The city wall's foundations were decorated with every kind of jewel. The first foundation was jasper, the second was sapphire, the third was chalcedony, and the fourth was emerald. <sup>20</sup> The fifth was sardonyx, the sixth was carnelian, the seventh was chrysolite, and the eighth was beryl. The ninth was topaz, the tenth was chrysoprase, the eleventh was jacinth, and the twelfth was amethyst. <sup>21</sup> The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was made from a single pearl. And the city's main street was pure gold, as transparent as glass. (CEB)*

When I was in elementary school, my mother took on a patchwork quilt of part-time jobs, one of which was as an event janitor at a United Methodist church. For lack of a better option, she would often take my brother and I along, giving us part of her duties to make the work more manageable and also to keep us out of trouble. I spent quite a few Saturday nights sweeping up rice—and, when rice was banned, flower petals—after various weddings, or setting the rows of chairs back in place while my mother wiped down the bathrooms and bridal rooms for the services the following morning. It wasn't exactly my favorite way to spend time, but there is something intense about a darkened church—especially one as large as that one, which was slightly bigger than the building here downtown.

Like any building that is only slightly familiar, the edges of it blurred in the twilight; the streetlamps that flicked on at dusk and poured through the blue stained-glass windows suddenly felt so much older than they did when I stood in the parking lot, and the various closets and classrooms belonged to a world that was so much different than my school or our apartment. There was an internal courtyard in the center of the slightly rectangular building and I have never heard the story of Jesus in Gethsemane in the same way I would have before seeing that garden with its July-lazy lightning bugs drifting over the stone benches and under the weary crabapple tree.

I learned, in those afternoons and evenings, that the line between holy spaces and ordinary spaces is extremely thin. Vacuums were just as loud in Sunday school classrooms as in my grandparents' living room, and picking up discarded bulletins from the narthex was just as

annoying as having to clean up my schoolwork when I'd spread it all out to study. The sacred and the stolid bumped against each other, keeping me company as my mother wiped down the sinks while I played hide and seek in the light of the windows with a God I couldn't see.

We continue our series this week on the gifts we are given to give back to the kingdom of God, talking through the ways we can serve the sprawling, messy wonder that is the Church. Today, we come to the physical reality of church—to our buildings, and how we care for them. Online folks, this one is going to be rather out of context for you, although I certainly invite you to stay for the Scripture if not the anchoring application.

John's Revelation—singular, not plural, since that's a pet peeve of mine I picked up in divinity school—is a letter to seven area churches about what it looks like to live in one empire and proclaim an entirely different kind. Revelation gets a lot of flak, not least because there's a contingent of Christianity that takes it literally and is waiting for blood rivers and the satisfaction of watching everyone they dislike die gruesomely, but also because it's just a weird book of the Bible. This is layers and layers of symbolism keyed to the audience of a time and place we do not inhabit, and as such we need to take care in our reading. It is easy to take today's passage at face value: after the earth has gone through some seriously unpleasant plagues and earthquakes and massive changes, the new Jerusalem shows up and it's shiny and clean. Of course, it would be, we who have thousands of years of paintings of gold-laden streets say; Heaven is of course startlingly lush.

But we miss John's true wonder if we stay there. "He took me in a trance," writes John of his angel guide in this vision, this revelation, "and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven." This new Jerusalem, this marvelous city of God, isn't in heaven light years away, as the song points out; it comes here, here to earth, here to the place where humans and animals and plants live, here where God walked as a man, here where we fight and cry and laugh with each other. The sacred and the stolid bump against each other and it makes everything holy, everything God's—it was good, very good, which is what God said about all of creation back in Genesis 2. John's vision reconsecrates the world, a living temple in its entirety to the God Who made it.

We then get a description of that city and I know, this is a part that seems dull to most people except for, perhaps, civil engineers. This is where we toss around words like "cubits" and check out until there are speaking roles again, but John was not describing a city just to be pedantic. He was taking a vision of a temple from the prophet Ezekiel, actually, and ripping it wide open. Professor Vernard Eller writes that, "John seems to have two main purposes behind this scene. One is to highlight the *beauty* of the redeemed church. He resorts to the most impressive physical imagery he knows to describe a reality and a glory that are far more than and quite different from the merely physical. Therefore, no one is to get literal and start asking questions like: 'Who'd want to live in that kind of a city?' or, 'Would pure gold even stand up as a construction material?' What John is saying here is, 'Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!'"<sup>1</sup> John covers the city in gemstones of every color of the rainbow that all had meaning. Sardonyx was used for protection talismans carved with heroic gods as well as signet rings to seal official documents;<sup>2</sup> carnelians were thought to spur true love and protect mental health;<sup>3</sup> emeralds

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<sup>1</sup> [The Most Revealing Book of the Bible \(Eller\) \(hccentral.com\)](https://www.hccentral.com)

<sup>2</sup> [History of Sardonyx Birthstone and Gemstones | August Birthstones \(americangemsociety.org\)](https://www.americangemsociety.org)

brought peace to those who rested their eyes there;<sup>4</sup> a subset of Judaism believed the Ten Commandments had been carved into sapphire tablets.<sup>5</sup>

And John makes them *the bricks in the wall*.

Not to make an inadvertent Pink Floyd reference, but the whole point of the new Jerusalem being covered in gems is that *they don't matter*. The point of the city is not to proclaim its overindulgence in wealth but for John to say that this city is the most luxurious one in history and none of it is even a tenth as important as the fact that God is there, that God has flung open every single one of those twelve gorgeous gates and said, “Come walk on gold, come ignore jasper, come see the new world I have created where all are welcome and no one is separated from My holiness, from My presence, from My love.” Everything is made sacred not because it is beautiful but because it *is*, because God has made it.

Professor Barbara Rossing writes, “Revelation makes important changes along the way that open up Ezekiel’s priestly vision to everyone. One striking modification is that New Jerusalem has ‘no temple’ (21:22). God’s presence now extends to the entire city’s landscape, with all of God’s people serving and reigning with Christ as priests (Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 22:3, 5).

“New Jerusalem is a welcoming city, not a gated community. Whereas Ezekiel’s temple gate was shut so that ‘no one shall enter by it’ (Ezekiel 44:1-2), the gates into New Jerusalem are perpetually open — they are ‘never shut by day and there will be no night there’ (Revelation 21:26). Even foreigners are invited to enter into this radiant city, whose lamp is the Lamb, Jesus. Nations will walk by its light, streaming in through its open gates (21:24, 26). In our time when nations and neighborhoods seek to secure themselves against outsiders, the church can claim Revelation’s vision of openness and multicultural welcome for all our cities.”<sup>6</sup>

First United Methodist, we’ve been having a lot of conversations about buildings of late, and everybody has an opinion about what to do with ours; I certainly do. But we are simply talking in circles if we don’t remember what the building is *for*, what the city is *for*, why it matters that the pearly gates never close. The empty sanctuaries and classrooms my family and I cleaned where the streetlamps danced through the blue-stained windows and the lightning bugs bobbed over swept stone pathways were mere shadows of how marvelous a vision John has of a city where everything is sacred and where all are welcome to come and enjoy that.

Do you see, Church? Do you see what we are called to be, we who call these “sanctuaries” and forget that it comes from “sanctus,” holy? This is holy ground, this deliberate awareness of a city that is not yet and a God Who is right now; this building is an outpost of a place where gold and pearls are nothing compared to the pricelessness of being in God’s presence, a testament to our calling to shut no one out and call everyone into the wonder of God’s grace. We so readily care for the obviously holy, the beautiful and shiny, the cathedrals of faraway Jerusalem real and imagined, but John offers us gold paving stones plunked down in a

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<sup>3</sup> [Carnelian: Formation, Characteristics, and Folklore - Owlcation](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Emeralds in Antiquity - Early Emerald Mines and Connoisseurs | The Natural Emerald Company](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Blue Sapphire | History of Sapphire Gemstones | Where Sapphires Come From \(americangemsociety.org\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Commentary on Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013

sheep's meadow so that we learn we are to care for all of creation as holy, welcome all of creation as sacred. Our buildings aren't sanctuaries because we built them in multiples of twelve and covered them in emeralds but because God dwells within them among us, reminding us that this is a place to breathe before we are sent out into the world that needs to hear it, too, is beloved.

How will it change us, change our conversations, if we think about our buildings not as places where we are made comfortable but as places where the whole world finds rest, wholeness, peace, grace, love, *God*?

Buildings are a lot—anyone who's had to pay rent or mortgages or fix a leaky sink knows that. And we don't have a lot of formal people; we have two staff for our two buildings. Henry, our building manager, is in charge of contracts and the regular things like clearing the parking lot and maintaining the boiler. Robert, our custodian, is in charge of keeping these places clean so that we can welcome folks into a safe environment. Say hey to them, and thank them, and preferably don't point out all the things you think they aren't aware of that need to be done. Say hi to the trustees committee, who are in charge of remembering when to replace the roof and how to best care for the external stairs at Green Wood and whether this will be the year we figure out air conditioning.

And know, Church, that if we're serious about our buildings being holy spaces in which people are invited to come be in God's presence, it is also ours to care for them. It may seem absurd, especially in an era when the idea of church buildings may seem outdated—and to be sure, there's a lot about how we deal with our church buildings that *is* outdated. Sometimes we think of the golden streets and forget the God Who walks them; sometimes we forget that these churches are places we go to spend deliberate time in community and communion with God and instead make the spaces into gods themselves. We must take care that we do not worship the temple instead of the One for Whom it was built.

But if we are to keep these sanctuaries, these holy places, these reminders of a jewel-laden city made beautiful by and for the God Who invites everyone, *everyone* in, then we are called to treat them as though they are places we are inviting *our God*. Why would we not care for the thing that anchors us to the God Who calls us by name? So do the little things: pick up trash when you see it on the lawn, or lend your skills with a hammer if needed, or take a sweep around the cobwebs of Green Wood if you have a moment, or sign up for a work day; there will likely be one coming up as we get into the holidays. If building work is absolutely not for you, consider whether giving to the building funds is feasible for you, or help brainstorm how we can best use our space to be a city open to all; John Kaczor had tons of listening sessions this summer about what we can do in the future as we think about these holy spaces of ours and we are still dreaming and praying for what kinds of gates God invites us to be part of opening.

The elementary schooler who picked up wedding rice could never have dreamed of one day standing in an entirely different sanctuary and preaching there, but I am glad not to have forgotten the holy mundanity of those nights. With my vacuum in hand I walked the streets of gold; playing tag with God, I danced through sapphires. The sacred and the stolid bump against each other in these spaces we build to know that God is here, marvelous and grace filled. May we love them as the gifts they are, and work from them toward that city as beautiful and diverse as we are where God invites everyone to come and be holy, to come and be. Amen.