Sermon #39

May 10, 2020

Revelation 22:12-21

**Come to the New City**

 New cities are being constructed all around the world. That is especially so in areas where the population is exploding, such as China, Africa, Malaysia, and many more areas. One new city in China is estimated to be three times the size of San Francisco. Another is projected to be as large as Las Angeles; still another the same size as Tokyo, Japan.

Much publicity and many invitations are sent to people to come and live in these new cities, which are already underway, having been started in the 1990s. Some are still projected to be completed around the 2030’s or 40s, such as Forest City, Malaysia, an ambitious, idealized “city of the future” with an “‘eco-city’ four times the size of Central Park in New York where the buildings will be covered in plants and there will be no cars. Accommodation is currently being built for 700,000 people, as residential high-rises, office towers, shopping malls, and hotels are rising up from land that was reclaimed from the sea,” says one article. They fill-in water ways with dirt.

The same article goes on to say that Forest City will have “homes so smart they'll keep your orchid perfectly watered without human intervention, that a window broken by local children kicking around a football will be fixed before you return home.” Amazing!

 These new cities bring opportunities for many more jobs, new homes, and a new lifestyle, but they also present problems. Despite the attempt to be eco-friendly, new cities do present problems to the environment with more overcrowded urban centers. And they have their limits, says one author, “Most of these cities are not for the poor or even for middle class people. They have luxury housing, golf courses, and other amenities that are expensive and energy / water intensive … further exacerbating differences between rich and poor.” Sad.

 There is another new city in the development process. Its foundations are from the architect of life itself. This one is designed for everyone! The architect has been preparing this place for all since the beginning of time. Invitations have been sent out all over the globe and are still going out every day. “Come and live in my city!” are the opening lines. It’s a city much larger and more magnificent than any city you’ve ever seen before. There is much light everywhere in the city. A crystal river flows through the city with the water of life continuously running through it. All the nations will be represented in this glorious city; the river will provide healing for all.

 I’m speaking of the New City, the New Jerusalem that will come down out of heaven prepared by God as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Rev. 21). There, God’s people will dwell with him forever where there will be no more crying, no more fear, no more sin, sorrow, pain, nor death… and no more coronavirus! Amen!

 The new cities being constructed in this world are ambitious for sure, but they will be nothing in comparison to the new city of Jerusalem that we will live in after the return of Christ. This current world will be no more. All the cities of this world will disappear like the city of Babel of old. Even the new ones will disappear. Because the new city and the new earth will remain forever.

 Now is the time of invitation. Who will go to this new city? Who will live there and who wants to live there? That’s the question being asked in the last chapter of the book of Revelation and all throughout the book (and all throughout the Bible). And the invitation is filled with a three-fold promise that we’ll see in the end.

Linda read part of the first chapter of Revelation, the prologue, that begins the vision, the revelation of Jesus Christ and what will take place soon. It’s a revelation to John, God’s servant exiled on the Island of Patmos for his faith in Christ. Thus, the whole vision will help Christians in persecution see the broader picture of God’s redemptive work in the world.

This sermon is part of our series on the invitations “to come.” We’ve already viewed Jesus’ call to weary fisherman to come to a renewal breakfast (John 21); Jesus’ call for disciples to come and get some rest (Matt. 6); and Jesus’ call to come and rest our burdened souls in him (Matt. 11:28). This morning, the call is to come to his new city to live with him forever. And in this last chapter of Revelation, there are actually three calls, three invitations to come to this city. Who is calling, and who are the called?

1. Called to come out from the world. (The call for saints)

First, there is a call from the author, Jesus, for the church to be different from the world, a call for the church to come out from the world, to be holy as Christ is holy – to be set apart, to not be like the current cities, but the new city.

This call is very evident in chapter 18. In that chapter, the city of Babylon the Great represents the rebellious kingdom of this world, as it does throughout scripture. In chapter 18, a mighty voice shouts that Babylon has fallen. And another voice calls from heaven saying, “*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.”* This is the invitation, the imperative to come out from the world. Oh, people of God, “Come out from the world, be separate from her sins.” Do not be like her even though you have to live in her for a time period.

Now returning to our main passage, the last chapter, we see this call in an implied way through the contrast in verses 14 and 15. Verse 14 is the seventh and final blessing found in the book of Revelation. Much like the beatitudes in Jesus’ sermon on the Mount (Matt 5), this begins with the phrase, “Blessed are…” And those who are blessed? They are those “who wash their robes.” White robes are the symbol of purity and wholeness all throughout John’s vision. The redeemed must have white robes.

They are called to wash their robes. Does that mean they are enabled to wash them by their own efforts? No, the rest of scripture affirms that only through the blood of Jesus Christ can we be washed from our sins. But we must take the initiative – to see the dirty stains we have and allow Jesus to wash us. Like the old hymn that asks, “Are you washed in the blood?” we can be assured that our sins are truly washed in Jesus’ blood and are made pure in him. And the verb here in Greek is a present participle, indicating an ongoing “washing” of their robes. They are to “keep washing” their robes in the fountain of Jesus’ blood. Then they will have the “right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.” Praise God.

Now, notice the contrast in verse 15. Outside the city the dogs reside. The dogs represent a Jewish symbol for all that was unholy and unclean. Three times in scripture dogs are symbolized with a negative connotation (Deut. 23; Matt. 15; Phil. 3). Thus, these “dogs” who live outside the city and are not allowed inside at all are all those who “practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (v. 15). This is not an exclusive list as a similar list and contrast to the victors is found in 21:7, 8. The author is very clear here. Those entering the city must be purified, as none of the old lifestyle will ever be found in the new city, where everything is pure. God is not impure in any way and he does not allow anything impure in his kingdom.

 So, the first call comes to the people of God. Come out from the city of this world and be cleansed through Jesus. The second invitation comes to the sinners and is found primarily in verse 17.

1. Called to come and drink living water. (The call for sinners)

In verse 17, the Spirit and the bride (the church) say, “Come.” There is the invitation. They call the unredeemed people of the fallen order to come to Jesus and receive their salvation (before it is too late). “And let everyone who is thirsty come” (22:17). And what are the called to come and do? “Let all those who wish [their desired will] take [put into action] the free gift of the water of life.” This is the water that flows through the holy city from the throne of God, so crystal clear. It’s the same living water that Jesus gave to the woman at the well and to the Samaritans (John 4).

Note here also that this invitation to drink from the pure water is given to all, that means even those in the category of the dogs can come and wash their robes. (That’s good news for my little dog, Coco!) Anyone, anywhere can hear the song, “Are You Washed in the Blood.” Outsiders can become insiders if they respond positively.

Someday, time in this world will expire and outsiders will remain outside, lost in the lake of fire, as chapter 20 indicates (v. 15). Outsiders could represent anyone of us if we choose not to repent. That also might include our family and friends who also need to respond to the invitation. That is part of our responsibility to call them. That’s why the Spirit and the bride say “come.” We help give the invitation.

Today, praise God that even outsiders in the dog’s category can be cleansed and made right with God. Praise God! This is good news for all. God wants all people in his new city, and he doesn’t want to leave anyone outside. Only the self-centered, unrepentant life remains outside.

I’m thankful that God began a new work early in my life, particularly at the age of five in a family devotion time. But I also remember a time in later grade school years when I had kind of lost touch with God. I know I felt more like the dogs on the outside of Jerusalem. And I was afraid because I had little or no assurance of my salvation. I didn’t really know where I would spend eternity.

So, one night in early adolescence, my parents took my brothers and I to an evangelistic meeting in Arnold, Nebraska, a small town about forty minutes from our small hometown. Most towns in Nebraska our small. We arrived just as the service was beginning and the small church was packed. The congregation was singing the first hymn when they put extra chairs in the center aisle. We all sat in a single file in a long line just to the outside of the aisle. I drew the luck of having to sit in the very front seat. It felt like God and everyone were staring directly at me in the spotlight. Yikes!

But the evangelist was superb. He began by painting a water-colored painting of what he was speaking about. Everything in his painting had to do with his message of salvation. I began to squirm, knowing that I was not living the way I should. I could think of bad things I’d done to my brothers or others at school. And there was the lack of assurance of my faith. At the end, the evangelist gave an altar call. There I was almost right in front of the altar already. Many people were already there, some having passed right by me. We must have sung 16 stanzas of “Just as I am.” Finally, I got enough courage to take two small, yet gigantic steps to the altar, to my freedom and to a new assurance of Jesus’ cleansing love in my life. I still recall the hand that someone laid on me at the altar. I looked back to see my dad smiling at me. I was home. I no longer belonged on the side with the dogs.

I trust that you have made your peace with Jesus and are not on the side of the dogs. I trust that every day you continue to follow in his ways and allow Jesus to do his full work in you daily. Revelation 22, the last chapter in the Bible, calls all Christians to come out of the way of Babylon by washing their robes. And it calls all sinners to come to the fountain of the water of life. Will you do that today? And will you help others come out? Now there’s one final call with a great promise – a very significant one at that – one that is repeated three times for emphasis.

1. Called to come in return. (The call for the King)

Three times Jesus promises to return. In verse 7, he first affirms his return to this world. “Look,” he asserts, “I am coming soon! Blessed are those who keep the words of the prophecy in this scroll.” So, he comes with a blessing as well, an encouragement for all weary followers to remain strong and faithful in persecution.

Then in verse 12, he repeats his promise again. “Look, I am coming soon!” With this affirmation of his return he gives another promise. “My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done. And he declares, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” In the prologue (1:8), God is said to be the Alpha and Omega. Now at the end it is Jesus. Both are one and triumphant. Jesus, our God is returning to earth to take us to his new holy city.

And then the third and final time is in verse 20. “He who testifies to these things,” Jesus himself, says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” This three-fold emphasis is a certainty of his coming. And where is the call for him to come? At the very end, just after the third promise to return. All those in the gallery, which would include the Spirit and the bride, the church, that’s us, all respond emphatically, “Amen, come, Lord Jesus.” At the end, we are the ones calling Jesus to return in his splendor and glory to take us to his new city. “Come, Lord Jesus,” we shout. The phrase in Aramaic that Paul also used in 1 Cor. 16, is the word, Maranatha. It was one of the earliest liturgical forms of worship in the New Testament Church. Marantha, come, Lord Jesus. And he does promise, “Yes, I am coming soon.” The call and the promises all agree that he is coming again.

Conclusion

 The new, adventurous cities of this world may entice many to come and live in their beauty, one that is fleeting. But the new, holy city that will last forever calls each of us and all people everywhere to come and live forever with Jesus in his light. The call is to come and drink the water of life. Leave the way of the dogs and come follow Jesus. And help others do the same. First, how will you respond today? And what will you do to help others respond to Jesus’ invitation and promised return? Come to the new city!