

The Ideal City
By Ellen Williams Hensle, 5/25/25

A couple weeks ago I saw a headline in the online satirical newspaper *The Onion* that made me laugh out loud: “City Planner Gets Halfway Through Designing City Before Realizing He’s Just Doing Philadelphia Again.” The text of the “article” reads: “saying that his designs felt oddly familiar as he was drafting them, urban planner William Reston confirmed Monday that while envisioning a revitalized downtown for Des Moines, Iowa, he had absentmindedly laid out the preexisting city of Philadelphia.

“[Quote] ‘I was just thinking about putting the city’s main art museum and premier university on opposite banks of the river when all of a sudden it hit me: “this is Philly!”’ Reston said after his project-stalling blunder, during which he gave Des Moines a sports complex with three major venues, 24 square blocks of colonial-era architecture, and a centrally located City Hall topped by a statue of a prominent regional historical figure. [Reston continued] ‘Honestly, I really should have spotted it when I changed Western Gateway Park’s name to JFK Plaza and added Robert Indiana’s LOVE sculpture, but for whatever reason it just made sense at the time.’ He then made an effort to hide his error by mixing some obscure Seattle neighborhoods into his layout.”

Despite the fact that this so-called Mr. Reston is only the character in a joke, we have to agree right? Philadelphia is pretty great. And especially up here in our corner of the Northwest, it’s easy to draw connections between our own city and the ideal city as envisioned by the author of Revelation. Rivers flowing? Trees blooming? We only have to jog over to the Wissahickon to be in our own slice of urban paradise.

Revelation is one of those books of the Bible that many of us in the mainline Protestant tradition studiously avoid. At its best it’s full of inscrutable symbolism, and at its worst it contains images of judgment and destruction that send shivers down one’s spine. We know that it has been misread as a puzzle that when correctly solved predicts the exact date of the end of the world; that date has come and gone countless times throughout history, while the mysteries of Revelation remain. And at times Revelation has been used as a weapon of fear, to coerce people into “accepting Christ” before the chosen ones are taken up into heaven to worship at the throne of the Lamb and the rest of us are left behind. That’s a lot of baggage for one book.

But Revelation also contains beautiful images of God’s dreams for humanity, images that as we see in today’s passage can offer us profound comfort and even inspiration. The angel who throughout the book has been guiding our author, a man named John – the angel takes John up to the top of a mountain from which vantage point he can see a new, God-given Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. In the part of chapter 21 we skipped over, John describes the city as perfectly symmetrical, 1500 miles in length, width and height, adorned with jewels, with twelve gates, each made of a single enormous pearl, and streets that are somehow both pure gold and transparent as glass. A vision of bounty and beauty.

Then we come to the portion of the vision that we read this morning. John tells us that the city of his vision has no temple – somehow the city itself seems to be the temple, the place of ritual purity where the presence of God comes to dwell with the people. The city of his vision is perfectly safe, with gates that stay open all the time, never needing to be closed against outsiders or attackers. This city is perfectly bright, for the glory of God shines continually, giving light to the inhabitants. This city is both perfectly diverse and perfectly inclusive – people from all over the world come together to worship God freely and equally.

The city of John’s vision is perfectly fruitful, with clear, clean water running through the streets and trees that provide produce all year long. This city is perfectly faithful – nothing unclean can enter it, no idols or idol-worshippers, only those who have committed themselves to God’s ways. This city is perfectly peaceful – the residents join God in reigning there in perpetuity, bringing people from every nation in and sending healing out. And best of all, this city is a place of perfect intimacy with God – the people see God face to face, an honor not even extended to holy men like Moses! And God’s name is the seal on their foreheads, marking them as God’s own forever.

This heavenly city, this new Jerusalem come down to earth – this is what God desires for us. A place of community and connection. A place of abundance and beauty. A place of safety and inclusion. A place of trust and joy. A place of peace with justice. A place to experience perfect harmony with the divine. This is the future God has in mind for our fallen humanity – all is redeemed, all is at peace.

Reading Revelation this week reminded me of a conversation I overheard between two friends in the Bible study that met in my freshman dorm at Penn. One of these friends was struggling with living in the city for the first time, yearning to return to a life of idealized pastoral simplicity out in the country. “Paradise was a garden after all,” she remarked, referring to the creation story in Genesis chapter 2. To which my other friend responded, “yes, the world began in a garden – but Revelation tells us it ends in a city.”

We may not have streets lined with gold just yet, but we do catch glimpses of the future God intends for us here in our own urban landscape – when we enjoy God’s creation by taking a walk in the forest, carefully preserved within the city limits by our ecologically-minded forebears and maintained by people of goodwill; when we interact with strangers and friends in a park called LOVE; when we experience the breathtaking beauty of art in a museum or a concert hall; when we cheer on our teams, the whole city together with one voice and one dream; when we gather for worship in this safe and sacred place. I’m sure you have your own list – come find me during coffee hour and tell me where you catch glimpses of divine new life in the everyday routines of this city we call home.

And – but. While John’s vision of the holy city coming down out of the clouds gives us the opportunity to reflect on the many blessings of living in our own city, it also gives us the opportunity to acknowledge how far we still are from God’s dream of justice and peace for all people. Revelation tells us that God desires enough for all, and yet more than 15% of people in Philadelphia County experience food insecurity, lacking the resources they need to maintain healthy and active lives. God desires equality for all, and yet long-abolished red lines still determine who has access to education and opportunity, creating stark contrasts between neighborhoods and races.

Revelation tells us that God desires safety and security for all, and yet our mission partners at West Kensington Ministry say their neighborhood lacks safe spaces for kids that are free of guns and drugs. God intends for people from all nations and backgrounds to be welcomed and included, and yet our immigrant neighbors are living in fear of ICE raids in this city which is supposed to be a sanctuary. God desires peace for all, and yet anxiety is on the rise as federal funding cuts and policy changes endanger our nonprofits, universities, and healthcare systems. Just as you can make your own list of Philadelphia’s joys, I’m sure you can make your own list of its challenges – all the places that have yet to be redeemed in this big, beautiful, complicated, struggling, frustrating, rewarding, scrappy underdog of a city of brotherly love.

So what do we do? One place to begin is with lament: crying out to God our pain and the pain of our neighbors, asking God to come and make things right. God, we don’t want anyone in this city to be hungry. We don’t want anyone in this city to be afraid. We don’t want anyone in this city to be homeless, or without heat in the winter, or living in a house that’s falling down around them. We don’t want anyone in this city to have their potential stifled because of racism or underfunded schools or generational poverty or gun violence. We name all the places in need of God’s redemption – we ask God for mercy – and we let the Holy Spirit push us out the door to take part in making our city more like the one John sees coming out of heaven from God.

This church is blessed with a legacy of service and advocacy. And in the last few years we have intentionally focused our mission efforts on our near neighbors, vulnerable people right here in Northwest Philadelphia. We work with capable and compassionate partner organizations that are doing their best not only to serve but to truly listen to the changing needs of our neighbors.

Just this month we became an official congregational partner of the Urban Resources Development Corporation, which provides home repairs and education to our community so that people can stay in the houses they own and preserve that wealth for the next generation. Last weekend we made sandwiches and casseroles for our friends at Face to Face, who offer warm hospitality and a sense of belonging to people in the Germantown community, as well as providing health care, legal assistance and social services. Our congregation helped to launch Souls Shot, which commemorates with dignity lives lost to gun violence and encourages people to make peace in our city and state. And we continue to collaborate with the Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry, which provides food, rent and emergency assistance to help our neighbors build safe and sustainable futures. We give of our time and our resources to all of these organizations, which, whether or not they are explicitly Christian, are working to bring more of God’s justice, peace and love to this city.

Speaking of the Crisis Ministry, earlier this week I asked Jeff Podraza how things were going over there, considering ongoing funding cuts to food distribution organizations and a generalized air of anxiety at nonprofits. In response he reminded me of the Crisis Ministry’s Vision Statement: “We envision a community where neighbors help neighbors, where barriers to essential services are overcome through human connection, and where every person has both the opportunity to receive support and to give back. As a hub of community engagement, we facilitate meaningful relationships between those who wish to serve and those facing challenges. Through these connections, we strengthen our community, ensuring that no one faces hardship alone and everyone has the chance to contribute to our shared wellbeing.” Jeff added, “Our vision statement may well describe OUR new Jerusalem.” By the grace of God, may it be so, that our city and all of God’s creation may come to be at peace.