



Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
May 26, 2019  
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was very young my Dad farmed for a living. By the time I was a teenager he had moved on to other, more lucrative, pursuits. Perhaps you've heard this joke: do you know how to make a small fortune in farming? Start with a large fortune.

I explain that my Dad was a farmer so you'll understand why it was that, at 7:00 a.m. on many Sunday mornings, we used to watch a news program called "U.S. Farm Report." If I remember correctly it was broadcast every week on WGN out of Chicago and it mostly covered farming in the Midwest – places like Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska. It was the kind of program that breathlessly reported the ups and downs of the market in pork belly futures.

One morning we watched as the host of the show visited a state fair in some far flung place like South Dakota. There was a contest going on at the fair to see who could plow the straightest furrow and, of course, the locals wanted to see the city-slicker TV journalist have a go at it, so the show's host hopped on the tractor and started plowing. As he drove he did what I think many of us might have done in the same situation: he kept looking down beside the tractor, and behind himself, to see if the furrow was straight. Suddenly my Dad commented, "he'll never plow a straight line like that." I was 10, I didn't know anything, but I said "are you sure? It looks like he's doing a pretty good job." Well, of course, when he finished his turn on the tractor his furrow was as crooked as a dog's hind leg.

I asked my Dad how he knew the reporter would fail and he pointed out that there's only one way to plow a straight a furrow: you have to keep your head up, looking straight ahead at the point your aiming for at the end of the row. You have to stay focused on where you're going, not where you are or where you've been.

There's a life lesson in that – it's true not only of plowing furrows but of everything we do. To be successful we have to be focused on where we're headed. And there's a spiritual lesson in that as well. In some

ways this idea of staying focused on our goal, of “keeping our eyes on the prize,” as we might say, is really the main theme of the last book of the Bible – the book of Revelation.

In today’s reading we hear of the New Jerusalem, the city of God, descending from heaven to earth and all the nations of the world coming home to life with God and each other. These are poetic images that help us visualize God’s goal for humanity, the prize on which we are to keep our eyes fixed as we plow through the hard ground of this life. The descriptions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation chapters 21 and 22 are fascinating and I commend them to your study. The descriptions give us a very vivid picture of the life of the world to come that God is creating in Christ.

It is interesting to notice, for example, that today’s text describes the New Jerusalem as surrounded by a wall with gates that are never closed. John says they are “never shut by day” and that it is always daytime, there is no night. So the gates are always open. We might wonder sometimes, is it ever too late for someone to turn away from fighting God, repent, and enter into God’s gracious love? A city with gates that stand open for all eternity seems to say that it is never too late, God always leaves the door open for anyone who wants to come home to come home. Like the father at the end of the parable of the prodigal son, God is always out in the darkness pleading with his wayward children to come in to the celebration.

As an aside, I might mention that a couple of months ago, in the midst of the ongoing debate about building a wall on our southern border, there were some at a national level who pointed out that even heaven has a wall around it. I think the question of whether to build a wall on our border is a political question that the Church doesn’t really need to comment on. Of course, if moral issues arise from building a wall – like environmental damage or injury to people – those issues might deserve comment, but the question of whether to build a wall or not is a political one. That being said, as the custodians of the Bible, I believe we in the Church should point out that the wall around the New Jerusalem is not really the best argument in favor of building a wall around our country – because the wall of the New Jerusalem has gates in it that always stand open. Anyone who loves what the citizens of that city love – God, compassion, forgiveness – anyone who loves these things can walk right into that city anytime they want.

Thinking about these eternally open gates to God’s city really begins to clarify the goal of human existence – the prize towards which our eyes should be focused. In our gospel text this morning Jesus explains it succinctly: Jesus and his Father will make their home with whomever loves Jesus and keeps his word. The

New Jerusalem is that home, that world to come where God and his beloved humanity – all of us – can live together in communion and peace.

Jesus goes on to say that he is sending the Holy Spirit to remind of these things, to help us keep our eyes focused on the truth that our true and eternal home is not in the pain and struggle of this world but in the joy and peace of the world to come. And Jesus tells us that keeping our eyes focused on where we're headed can help us find peace of mind and heart right here and right now. "Peace I leave with you," he says, "my peace I give to you. . . Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

What does this peace look like? We could talk about many examples, from our own lives and from the lives of others, but I am reminded of something that St. Athanasius wrote 1,700 years ago. Towards the end of a short book he wrote about why the Son of God became human as the man Jesus Christ, Athanasius talked about those who had faced death in the Roman persecutions instead of denying Christ. These were people that he had known personally because he had lived through these persecutions during his childhood and teenage years. He wrote:

. . . [people] who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise [death] so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses of the Savior's resurrection from it. . . So weak has death become that even [those] who used to be taken in by it, mock at it now as a dead thing robbed of all its strength. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot the passers-by sneer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross.<sup>1</sup>

What I hear the Saint telling us is that when we are focused on where we are right now or where we've been – when we're focused on the pain, doubt, and fear that this life brings – we are terrified of death to the point that we will fight it tooth and nail, even killing others to save ourselves. But when we lift up our eyes to God's goal for humanity, when we fix our hearts and minds on the resurrection of Christ and our own resurrection in the New Jerusalem, then we are able to hear the Holy Spirit speaking to us of the peace of Christ. Our hearts can become untroubled and unafraid.

This, then, is the good news message of Easter. Our Father has a plan in Christ to bring us all safely home

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1. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 5.27.

and the Holy Spirit is speaking this news into our hearts every day if we will only listen. As our collect says today, God has prepared for us such good things as surpass our understanding: may the Holy Spirit pour into our hearts such love towards the Father, that we may, through Christ, love him in all things and above all things, and may obtain his promises which exceed all that we can desire.

Amen.