

Revelation 22:1-21

7 Easter C Midweek + June 5, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The River, the Tree and the Garden

The Word of the Lord from Revelation 22: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life" (Revelation 22:1-2a). This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, one last time for this Easter season: He is risen! He is risen indeed!
Alleluia!

The risen Christ makes all things new: that's what we have in our epistle, from the last chapter of the Bible. It's a vision of heaven, the new Jerusalem, and note that it includes a river and a tree of life. That's to make you think way back to the beginning of creation, where we hear in Genesis 2, "And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden" (Genesis 2:8-10a). There, in Eden, God was present with Adam and Eve. All was new and perfect and good. There was no sin, and thus no sorrow, pain or death. If you read carefully, you'll note that the six days of creation each ended with an evening, but the seventh day did not. It's as if the day of rest went on forever.

Now, at the end, all that was lost from the beginning is restored. The curse of sin is gone, vanquished by Christ's victory over sin, death and devil. In the new Jerusalem, you find a river and a tree of life. There is no night, for the Lord is always present with His people, and He is the eternal light. The garden of Eden is returned as the city of God.

Not only are the beginning and the end remarkable for what is there, but also for what is not there. In the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, there was no sin – therefore, no pain, no sorrow, no death. As Revelation comes to a close, it declares the same about heaven – though rather than declaring that there is no sin, it declares that there are no sinners: "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

Outside are the dogs – not the four-footed kind, but this is a reference to those who do not believe in Christ. Their desire to be apart from Him continues from this world to the eternity, and so the city is not for them. Lacking repentance and faith, they don't want to be inside.

Outside with the dogs are the sorcerers, and not just the Hollywood sorts with magic wands and pointy hats. In Scripture, sorcery includes wanting to control creation apart from God's will, or wanting to compel God to do one's own will. So one is guilty of sorcery if he chants a pagan incantation to try to force spring to come early against God's design; and one is equally guilty if he prays a prayer that seeks to coerce God to do his bidding.

With the dogs and the sorcerers are the sexually immoral, those who have misused God's gifts of sex and sexuality for their own pleasure and purposes. It's not just those who have led blatantly immoral lives, for the Lord teaches in Matthew 5 that anyone who has lust in his heart is guilty of adultery. Likewise outside are the murderers, those who do not value life as a priceless gift from God. This is not just the cold-blooded killer on death row, but also those who merely have hatred in their heart for others – or even those who simply have cold hearts that do not help their neighbors in need.

Along with the murderers are the idolaters. Rather than trust in the one true God who could save them, they put their trust in false gods and idols that they feared or loved more. They did not always love the Lord with all their heart, soul, strength and mind. But their idols could not cleanse them of their sin, and there are no false gods in heaven; so they are outside, too.

With the rest of the wicked is everyone who loves and practices falsehood. That's a very general description that could cover an awful lot; but then again, God loves the truth and hates the lie. And there is no greater lie than, "I don't need Jesus to get into heaven, because I'm good enough without Him." That is a lie that people embrace and practice every day.

So outside of heaven are the dogs, the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

The question then is ... where are you?

You're not in the Garden of Eden: Adam and Eve were exiled from there a long time ago, and with them all mankind. You're not in heaven, either: you're in a place with sin and sorrow, pain and death. It's not just around you: it's in you. In fact, bitter though this is, it is the truth: according to the Word of the Lord, you're guilty of all of the sins in this text. As one who doubts, you are among the dogs. As one who wants your own will over God's, you are among the sorcerers. As one who misuses God's gift of sexuality in thought, word and deed, you are among the sexually immoral. As one who does not love his neighbor, you are among the murderers. As one who places trust in other things, you are among the idolaters. And as one who all too frequently believes you're lovable to God apart from Christ, you are one who loves and practices falsehood.

It is a slap in the face to hear, but remember: to break one bit of God's law is to be guilty of it all. Not a smidgeon of sin is allowed in heaven: anything less than pure and holy is outside.

This means that you would be numbered among the wicked outside, but there is an important difference. While you are not yet in heaven – while you've not yet come into the glorious presence of Christ, Christ has come into this world and into your presence. You are outside heaven for now, but you are not alone. Your Savior, Jesus Christ, became flesh and dwelt among us. Between Eden and heaven, He is the river of life who proclaimed in John 7, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38). Apart from Him, this world would be a desert devoid of life – but He came to give living water, to save you from death.

He saved you from death by dying in your place. There was no river of life apparent on Calvary when He was crucified. Or was there? There was the Son of God, condemned by God for the sins of the world. And what did He cry on the cross? "I thirst." No water, no river of life for Him there. He was taking the place of the dogs, the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, idolaters and all who love and practice falsehood. On the cross, He was suffering hell for them – He was the one outside of His Father's mercy so that they could be brought back in by faith. And what happened when He died and soldiers pierced His side with a spear? Blood and water *flowed*. Risen again, rivers of life still flow from Him.

Linger at Calvary for a moment longer, and behold two more things. In Eden and heaven, there is the tree of life so that the people of God may eat of it and live. On Calvary also there is a tree: planted by Roman troops, it has one crossbeam for its branches. That cross is the tree of life in this world, because by His crucifixion Christ has redeemed you for heaven. Now He is risen from the dead, having borne on that tree the fruit of forgiveness and life. Take and eat. Take and drink, for the forgiveness of sins.

And before we move on, remember the penitent robber on the cross. Following his ill-spent life of crime, he would be numbered among the dogs, sorcerers and the rest. But by God's gift of faith, He believes that Jesus is His Savior. Repentant, he says to Jesus, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus responds, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

"Paradise," by the way, is a Persian word that means "garden," most specifically the Garden of Eden. Jesus says to the penitent robber, "Today you will be with Me in Eden restored – you'll be with Me in heaven."

For now, you are outside heaven, but Christ is with you. And by means of His sacrifice on the cross, He has brought the river of life, the tree of life and the hope of the garden to you. So while you are outside with the dogs and the sorcerers, by the grace of God you are no longer numbered among them. You are no longer a thing accursed because of your sin so that you cannot enter heaven; instead, in Christ, you are blessed.

For the Lord says, "Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." So blessed are you: for God has put His saving Word into your ears; and by the grace and faith that He gives you, you keep His Word – you hold onto it and gladly trust in Christ as your Savior.

He says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." So blessed are you: for your robe has been washed white in the blood of the Lamb. The river of life flowed at your baptism, where Christ joined you to His death and washed your sins away. The fruit of the tree of life – the forgiveness won at the cross – is still given to you in His Word and Supper. Even now, God sees you as His holy, beloved child without stain or blemish, solely because Jesus has washed you clean and made you holy.

The Lord promises that He is coming soon. Heaven is yours, with its river of life, its tree of life and the paradise of Eden restored. You will see God face-to-face. In the meantime, though, you are not alone. The Spirit says, "Come," beckoning you to Christ where He is found. The bride of Christ – the Church – likewise bids you, "Come." Come and be washed clean for the sake of Jesus. Come and hear and hold onto His Word of absolution. Come and receive His body and blood.

And so we respond, "Come, Lord Jesus." We pray that the Lord would return soon. For while we are greatly comforted that Christ is here with us outside the city, we earnestly look forward to the day when we enter into His glorious presence. That day nears; but in the meantime, the Lord still comes in His means of grace. Blessed are you: the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

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