



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **What We Leave Behind**

Revelation 21: 1-3, 9-10, 15 -16, 22-27;  
22:1-5

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Revelation is a vision—an elaborate and extended and florid metaphor, intended to point toward a reality that is wider and wilder than human imagination. Revelation is full of strange monsters drawn from Daniel and Ezekiel, plagues reminiscent of the Exodus, promises that ring with the joy of Isaiah, and at its end the new Jerusalem, the City of God descending from heaven—one of only a very few attempts in all of the Bible to describe in any detail what awaits the human spirit in eternity. And as beautiful as this description is, this ending is not what the rest of the book would make you think was coming.

The beginning and middle and even parts of the end of Revelation are all about a clash between good and evil—personified by the people of God on the one hand and what is called the nations on the other hand. The conflict described in Revelation is one in which the nations inflict real harm and terror on the people of God. The nations had stolen and hoarded and devoured every good and wholesome bit of food and drink, gorging themselves while the children of the people of God went hungry. The nations had taken over the countryside, turned the cities into isolated prisons, the nations had destroyed the temple, burned the holy place of the people of God because it was precious to them, and destroying the most precious things causes the most suffering.

But all that suffering at the hands of the nations will be worth it for the people of God because of the reward—the great hereafter, the new Jerusalem. This is where the people of God will live for eternity, with the spirit of God among them and in the sunshine of endless day. An end to all that suffering dished out by the nations.

But there's one problem. The nations will be let into the city too. In fact, the whole city seems built around the need to accommodate the nations. First off, it's huge. 1500 miles across—in the first century most people wouldn't travel further than 30 miles away from the spot they were born. This city is fifty times further than that, just on one side. Not only that, it is 1500 miles tall. 1500 miles tall is very, very tall; the Hubble telescope would be orbiting around a quarter of the way up to the top of the New Jerusalem. It could accommodate an unthinkable number of people.

Then there is the tree of life in the center, and it says that the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations. And then there's the gates. The gates are never closed during the day—and because the light is coming from the goodness of God in the midst of the city, it will literally never be night time again. The city is tailor-made to be a dwelling place for the people of God, and also the nations too.

Would the people of God really have to share eternity with the nations? After what the nations had done—greed and oppression and violence against the vulnerable—and now the people of God are supposed to spend eternity with them? For a Book that's about a climactic clash between good and evil—everybody living together in one big city forever is not a crowd-pleasing ending.

Revelation is a vision—an elaborate and extended and florid metaphor, intended to point toward a reality that is wider and wilder than human imagination. And it is a challenging vision, not because it is so fantastical. It is challenging because it is easy to understand. A growing clash between people of good will and those who seem committed to hate. And at the end of it...the City of God, beautiful eternity, where God will be among the people, the City of God will be wide open for those very people who are committed to hate? Really? For the people who profit by making weapons of war, who sit on 4Chan disseminating antisemitism -- the city of God is for them?

I believe that God's love is for all people, I believe that at the end of the day God gets what God wants and that what God wants it to draw all Her children close and reconcile all things. But...But...I just cannot stomach the idea that the virulently racist man who gunned down worshippers in Christchurch New Zealand, who live-streamed his violence to the internet like it was a spectator sport, who inspired and radicalized the Buffalo gunman, I just cannot stomach the idea that he should go strolling through the gates of the City of God saying to himself—See? I knew I was right all along. It isn't just.

That's the problem—I need for God to be most merciful, ever more willing to forgive than I am even to ask for forgiveness. But I need for God also to be just, never forgetting to set right what has once gone wrong. How can God be merciful and just?

Revelation is a vision—an elaborate and extended and florid metaphor, intended to point toward a reality that is wider and wilder than human imagination. And this vision points toward how God can be both most merciful, and fiercely just.

The gates are never shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations, but nothing

unclean will enter it. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations, but nothing unclean will enter it.

It's easy to imagine the gates to the City of God being big ornate wrought iron affairs, but all gold, of course, with St. Peter guarding the only entrance, examining everyone who arrives, sort of a super high-stakes customs booth. But the Book of Revelation talks about the entrance into the City of God differently. There are 12 gates and no one is guarding them. They're always wide open and anyone can just come walking through, but they may not bring just anything in with them. Whatever they have done in their life that glorified God or honored the dignity of humanity—those things they can bring in. But abominable things—like hate and malice and greed—they cannot bring that into the Holy City, they will have to leave that behind, they will have to leave that part of themselves behind.

The gates are never shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations, but nothing unclean will enter it

Everyone who comes to the gates of the Holy City will be made to reckon with the reality of their life—what honored God and what was a mere addition to human misery. And everyone who faces God's gates will have some things they must leave behind, and some things they can take with them. For some, if they have built their whole lives around hate, it will mean leaving behind perhaps more than they bring with them. For a few, whose lives have truly revolved around debasement of others, little more of them might enter the Holy City than what survives passing through a lake of fire.

God is most merciful, and fiercely just. This is the vision of the never closing gates of the ever holy City of God. Anyone can enter, but they will have to leave behind those things of themselves that brought nothing but misery. What a gift—for it is too heavy a thing to carry my wrongdoings through eternity. My eternal reward will begin with perhaps God's greatest gift—of justice—to know surely what I have done wrong and to lay that down, to leave it behind forever, no longer a part of me, because nothing unclean can enter into the City of God. Before I could ever enter into the City of God, I would have to lay down pride so that I could enter the gates of heaven bearing no mark of distinction other than the name of God on my forehead. Pride and much more, I'm sure. The very worst of my mistakes, to lay them down at the dawning of the last day, it will be a relief. And you, whatever mistakes you may have made in your life, whatever memories you carry that even to think about them makes a flash of shame come rushing up your throat so that you can't bear to think of it, you will not have to carry that forever. Before the golden gates of the City of God, the very

first gift of eternity will be that God will take the burdens from your back, lay them down before the golden gates so that you can go as light as sunshine into endless day.

Amen.