

Dan Phillips: Visions and Cities

Sermon presented at Seekers worship

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by Dan Phillips

Visions and Cities

In the 21st chapter of Revelation, almost the end of the Bible, there is a marvelous image. John says, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." Then he says, "And I saw ...the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God ..." And further, he says, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away."

As a famous Seeker once said, there are several sermons in this passage begging to be preached. However, because I would like to relate this to my own experience and what is happening in my life, today I will preach only one of them.

I remember clearly hearing this passage read in the fall of 1998 when Martha and I visited the Wesley Seminary campus. Martha was trying to decide where she would attend seminary, and we both went to their 'new student day' to see what Wesley was like. As part of that day, we attended their chapel service, and in that beautiful little chapel, I heard this passage read. It stuck with me, as you can tell.

For this is a passage about a vision and a city. Now, the book of the Revelation of John is full of visions. Moreover, most of them are at least R-rated for violence! Nevertheless, at the end of this horrific collection of bad events, John has another vision. This one is of paradise, utopia, the best of

all worlds. As visions go, not all of John's vision of the next world greatly moves me. Some of what he says is too alien for me to understand. His vision of no tears, no pain, no death, no sun even; only the God-made Holy City does not connect very well with my current life. Nevertheless, what I recognize most is the happy conclusion – the good thing after the bad, the denouement, the reason we read books and go to movies, the fulfillment, the redemption, the renewal, the celebration. What caught my soul that morning at Wesley was the glimpse of the possible, the reflection of the belief that things will, eventually, get better, get well.

The Bible often talks about such events in terms of visions. Peter, at Pentecost, one of those fabulous moments of renewal and celebration, quotes the prophesy of Joel, which says:

*“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my spirit on all people,
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.”*

It was fabulous to read Jeanne Marcus' sermon entitled [“Between Memory and Vision.”](#) It was interesting to me that a part of her discussion of 'visions' focused on cities. This last month Martha and I were part of a weeklong 'urban immersion' class through Leland Seminary that looked at church ministries in Washington DC. (It was clear in studying church ministry in the District in the last 50 years that Church of the Savior, and its relatively few members, has had a disproportionately large effect on this city, a far greater effect than any other church group I know of.)

My experiences in the 'immersion class' were that there are many churches trying to minister to this city. However, most of the churches are dying, are discouraged unto death, are empty of people except for the faithful few and they are tired

of trying. 50 or 100 now attend churches that had thousands of members. Churches whose pastors were theological leaders now are barely able to support a pastor. The churches and pastors that remain often admit that they have no clue about how to revive their church. Others talk of starting new churches inside old churches, letting the old die because they do not believe anything can be done for or with the old organizations. During the 'immersion' week, it became clear to Martha and me that Mt Vernon Baptist Church shares many characteristics with the urban churches we studied; so many that, at times, hearing about other churches and their struggles became almost bizarre; it was that familiar.

In the middle of all this spiritual despair, I remember the 'new heaven and new earth'. John was saying that renewal would happen, even after the most catastrophic of events. God will start again with us, every time. Nevertheless, most of us are content to put that renewal off until the end of time, as John did. For the renewed world is strange, is different. I can hear the people of the end time now saying, "We can't live without the sun. And crying and mourning are necessary!" This is why most of the older churches in this city are not renewed: renewal is alien! Indeed, we also must be changed, be renewed, to enjoy the new heaven and the new earth.

One pastor that we talked to (Paul Clark, pastor of National Memorial Baptist Church) related how he had set up a tent in the basement of the church, and had moved worship into the tent, trying to emphasize to this once-large-now-small church that they were now in the wilderness. He said he did not know yet if it would have the impact for which he hoped.

[In her sermon last Sunday](#), Carolyn Shields (yes, I read her sermon too) said, "As a nation we must ask ourselves 'Do we really want liberty and justice for all? Do we really believe that every child has the right to a good education? Should poverty really be abolished? How badly do we want to address the racial inequalities that feed the well-being of the white

majority?’ Today, I think that as Christians we must ask ourselves not only what we would like the future to be, but also whether or not we believe we can get to that future.

Can we make things better; or can we just talk about what better things would be like? Do we have a vision of a better world that works, or just a list of tune-ups to this one? Are we willing to be renewed? In the discussion with professors of the seminary about how to ‘reach’ Washington DC, we talked about demographics, culture, ethnic and religious diversity. We talked about techniques, resources and location. In addition, we timidly admitted that maybe we had to change, a little. Mostly the talk was about how to promote churches and missions. Nowhere and no way did we discuss how the church could change the very basic assumptions of our culture. That was just beyond us. Survival is the order of the day.

It would seem that for the churches we visited, and for the group in the class, and for the teachers and lecturers in the class, there was no vision of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’, of a ‘holy city.’ It would appear that we had given up trying to make a serious difference in the whole city, and concentrated on surviving in our portion of the city. As I think of all this, I too often have little faith, have little expectation of making a difference.

It was pointed out in the immersion class that the Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city. In Isaiah 58, verse 12 (a verse in an alternate lectionary reading for today) God promises, “you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” This image of urban renewal is divine in origin. What a promise, if we can hold it! To believe that not only can we speak the word of God, but that it may actually have a positive impact in this city, in whatever city; to believe that God will pour out her spirit on all people, even me; to believe in the presence and possibility of the Republic of God.