

Sermon :: 18-May-2025
Easter 5, Year C

“ I saw the *holy city*, the *new Jerusalem*,
coming *down*[,] *out of heaven*[,] *from God* ”

It's such an important 'Easter' story ... such a fundamental development in the post-Resurrection plan-of-God ... that it gets told *twice*!

The story of St Peter's vision of the sheet coming down from heaven and the eating of unclean animals ... and of this being a call, from God, for Peter to go to a Gentile household and bring its members into the body of Christ, by baptizing them ... *first* occurs in chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles ... and then, *immediately* afterwards, right at the beginning of chapter 11 (in the lesson we just heard), Peter *retells* it, *all over again*, for the Apostles and other followers of Jesus, back in Judea.

Now, we readers don't *need* to hear the story twice—and *certainly* not back-to-back. So, I think, this repetition must be a *signal*—a *sign* that something extremely important is taking place here. Indeed, up until this point in Acts, the Apostles have invited only fellow *Jews* to become members of the nascent Church. So, when Peter visits the *Gentile* household in Joppa ... and the Holy Spirit descends upon Gentiles much as it had upon the Apostles (at Pentecost), and Peter baptizes everyone in the house in the Name of Christ ... it's a *pivotal* development ... a *watershed* moment ... indeed, a *revelation* ... sudden and yet final ... that in Jesus' ministry, His Death and His Resurrection ... the God of Israel has done a truly radical ... a *wild* ... an almost *unbelievable* new thing: For Jesus' vanquishing of both sin and death ... His relieving humanity of the twin afflictions we could never overcome or evade on our own ... is *not* for Israel *alone*, but for *all*. Jesus' **grace** and **mercy** are *universal*, not limited or constrained. *All* are invited to sup at the Table of Eternity. God *is*, indeed, “making *all* things” *completely* “new”: *has* instituted ... *has already begun* building ... right here on *earth* ... a “new heaven and a new earth” ... a “holy city” where God will gladly dwell among mortals.

And, as Jesus Himself tells us, the watchword of this new city-state ... the motto on its currency ... the pledge of allegiance to its unity ... the oath of citizenship under its laws ... is *LOVE* ... is *LOVING* one another ... is not only *having* but also *doing* active, open, generous ... counter-cultural LOVE—yes, maybe even ‘aggressive’ LOVE—*for every single creature* in this world, *all* of whom *God* *LOVES* *equally*.

We hear the story of Peter-at-Joppa *twice*, then, for *two* reasons: *First*, because it is, in microcosm, the very model of the *liberated* and *liberating* ... the life-giving and life-sustaining: indeed, the *eternal* life-sustaining ... *LOVE* that Jesus makes the very *blueprint* of this new “holy city” of God. And *second*, as Peter *shows* us, *we*, as Jesus' followers, are the *builders* of Jesus' “new heaven and new earth.”

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So, Jesus has given us a *blueprint* of *LOVE* for His new **holy house** ... and He's commissioned *us*—His messengers; His agents—to *build* it. So, the question *then* becomes: What are we to build this holy house *with*? What *materials* and *techniques* are we to employ as we build the **holy house** of Christ? Well, I can't name them *all* ... but for starters—to ‘lay the foundation’—I'd like to suggest *four*:

First, **INCLUSION**. We seem to spend an awful lot of time and energy, of late, deciding who's in and who's out ... who deserves and who doesn't ... who meets the criteria, checks the boxes, has the right

pedigree, and thus, is welcome ... and who **does** not, and thus, **is** not. I, however, would like to suggest that God is *prejudiced*—yes, *prejudiced*: that is, God has *pre-judged everyone* ... every person, every creature, every natural thing in existence on this planet ... in LOVE ... as wonderful, worthy and welcome. Therefore, as we strive to build this world into the “holy city”—the holy house—of Christ ... we must *INCLUDE*—actively *make a place* for—every human being ... in spite of—and, indeed, perhaps even *because* of—how they may differ from us and our norms. For precisely in how they *diverge* from or *challenge* our ways ... may lie the essential framing—the *dynamic structure*—that will allow Christ’s holy house to rise stronger, sturdier and even *more* hopeful.

Second, **DIGNITY**. We bandy this word around a lot in the Episcopal Church, and not without reason: “Respect[ing] the DIGNITY of every human being” is a core vow we make at our baptisms. But we don’t say a whole lot about what DIGNITY *means*. This isn’t the time for a long discourse, so for today, I’d like to suggest a simple three-part test: We respect people’s DIGNITY when ... at a *bare minimum* ... [i] their humanity—which is to say, the *God-givenness* and *-giftedness* of their creation, and the truth of *Christ’s dwelling within them, too*—is accepted by *all*, without condition or caveat; [ii] (when) they can move about in society without fear of harassed, hauled away or hijacked by those in authority; and [iii] (when) they can gaze upon their children, asleep at night ... and be filled with *hope* and *joy*, and not *fear* and *despair*. For if INCLUSION is the framing or structure that holds the “holy house” up ... DIGNITY is the cladding that makes it a *shelter*, to *live* in.

Third, **NURTURE**. Now, here’s where things begin to get a little harder ... as we move past the mere acceptance of INCLUSION and the basic decency of DIGNITY ... and into people’s *flourishing* and *development*. We must always recall that Christ not only *saved* humanity, upon the *Cross* ... but also *entered* us, at the *Manger*. Therefore, we have a responsibility ... a Christian *duty* ... to not only recognize, but also *tend to* ... *develop* ... **NURTURE** ... the potential—the *Christly* potential—that exists within every single human being. While we cannot know exactly *what* gifts God has endowed each person with ... we must—*universally*—facilitate each person’s *realization* of their unique gifts ... by ensuring their enjoyment of the *same* necessities we *insist* upon for our *own* selves and families: adequate food, adequate shelter, adequate healthcare, adequate education and training ... and free and unfettered—*unbiased* and *unbarrier-ed*—participation in the political, economic, social and cultural life of this nation. For while a structure framed and cladded from top-to-bottom may technically be a *house* ... it’s of very limited use unless we *finish* and *furnish* it: ‘*NURTURE*’ the house, to make it *holy* ... to make it a *home*.

And fourth, **PEACE**: and more precisely, the persistent *pursuit* of PEACE. So often, we’re disappointed when a “holy house” we’ve built—framed, clad, finished and furnished—doesn’t *solve* the problem ... doesn’t *end* the crisis ... doesn’t cause the hostilities to *cease*. This isn’t because we’ve *failed* as Christ’s builders ... but because finishing the house and inviting others to live in it **with us** is only the *beginning*. Inevitably, *co-habitation* will lead to *conflict*. And thus, our *final* task as builders of Christ’s holy house of LOVE is *also* one that *never ends*: *discerning* the frictions, divides and hatreds that separate the people who come to live in it ... *addressing* them in a constructive, non-threatening way ... and working to *resolve* them through mutual respect, creativity and thoughtfulness: For the

persistent pursuit of PEACE ... *patience* coupled with *hope* ... will keep everyone who lives in Christ's holy house ... around the common table of community and fellowship.*

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INCLUSION. DIGNITY. NURTURE. PEACE. These are *some* of the aspects of **the** LOVE-one-another that Christ calls us to ... as we go about the vital, and holy, work of building the “new heaven and new earth”—the holy house—He broke ground on, that first Easter Day. He’s given us the commission and supplied all the blueprints. Now the question is: Will we roll up our sleeves and actually ***build*** it? *I* sure hope so ... and *so* does *He*.

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* I am struck by the consonance, here, of this powerful prayer from the *BCP* (p 825):

Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City to which the nations of the world bring their glory: Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of the earth. Renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life. Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order; and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.