Mercy, Wrath and Kingdom

Three Sermons

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A Note to the Reader

These three sermons were preached at Epiphany Anglican Church over several years. They are presented here as an introduction to how we preach at Epiphany—and, more importantly, to the God we preach about.

Each sermon works with a different face of the Gospel. In Jonah, we meet a God whose mercy extends further than we are comfortable with. In Exodus and John, we confront the cost of that mercy—the wrath of God satisfied by the blood of His own Son. And in Revelation, we see where it all leads: not just to individual salvation, but to the church as the dwelling place of God with His people forever.

If you are exploring what Epiphany is about, or what Anglicans believe, these sermons are a place to start.

— Peter

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The Mainspring of Mercy

Jonah 4

Unforgiveness gets a bad rap at church.

> And it should, right? We just heard Jesus say last week in Matthew 18 that we should forgive, and not only that we should forgive, but that we should forgive 70 times seven. And why does Jesus say we should forgive like that? Well, because we have been forgiven, of course. But to be honest, Jesus also puts a threat behind it, doesn't he? He tells this parable about the man who owes a great debt and is forgiven by the king, but then doesn't forgive the servant who owes him a little debt. Then what happens? That's right, the king finds out, and takes back the forgiveness he's offered and tosses the man who didn't forgive in prison. And what does Jesus say about that? *"So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

Forgive, or else you won't be forgiven! Strong stuff.

But, there is more to the Biblical story of forgiveness. We hear that in Jonah chapter 4 today.

> Just to set the stage - remember what happens in the book of Jonah. There is this terrible, today we would probably call them, terrorist, empire up to the north of Israel called Assyria. The Assyrians repeatedly invaded everybody around them, including Israel. If you resisted at all, they did awful things to you and your city like chop off everyone's head and hang them from the trees like fruit. They actually did that. And not only that, but they clearly didn't see anything wrong with the terrible things they did. The Assyrians even carved dioramas of their atrocities on the walls of their palaces. And the very heart of their terrorist state is this big city of Nineveh (it's actually were archeologists found the palaces with the atrocities carved on the walls). But, here's the unbelievable thing the book of Jonah tells us. God loves these people in Nineveh. If they will repent, he wants to forgive them. God even sends a prophet to them, someone to speak for God, named Jonah to let them know they can still escape the just desserts of their terrorism. And lo and behold, the book of Jonah tells us that this city full of terrible people actually repents - at least for a little while. Chapter 3, verse 5 says *"And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them."* A few verses further into chapter 3, we learn that the king in Nineveh was so enthusiastic about repentance that he even had the city's animals dressed in sackcloth (v. 8).

And that brings us to our reading today from the end of Jonah 3 and then Jonah chapter 4.

You see, here at the very end of the book of Jonah, a book all about repentances and God's forgiveness, we learn that this isn't really a feel-good story. At least not for the main character, Jonah.

Why? well Jonah doesn't want Nineveh to repent and never did. He doesn't want God to forgive the Assyrians. And though the book doesn't say it, it's fairly obvious why that would be: That chopping of heads and hanging them in trees bit was something that the Assyrians had done to people that Jonah cared about.

It makes no sense to Jonah that simply saying "I'm sorry" and putting sackcloth on you and the family donkey for 40 days means that God isn't going to enact justice for that.

In fact, Jonah 4, verse 1 says God's forgiveness of Assyria *"displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry."*

> Can you imagine that, a prophet angry at God because of his forgiveness? Now, of course we know that God's being God here. He forgives. And we probably reflexively want to take his side (and in the end we will - as Jesus reminded us last week, forgiveness is the side we must be on). But before we do, I think we should acknowledge that Jonah has a point. How would we feel if a bunch of terrible terrorists who had killed people we love got off free just because they felt bad about it?

I think I have some insight into how we would feel.

I went to a small high school. My graduating class had 66 people in it. That meant there was under 300 of us total in grades 9 through 12 all under one roof. It also meant that we all knew each other.

> One of the people I knew was named Dru Sjodin. We were three grades apart, but I sang in the tenor section of the choir with her older brother, Sven (yes, I went to school in Minnesota, and some people in Minnesota are indeed named Sven). When I went off to college I lost track of the Sjodin family for a while. In fact, the next time I heard of Dru was after I had graduated. Her story was on the news. Dru had been abducted from a mall parking lot. She was abused, beaten, murdered and dumped in a ditch. They caught the man who did it pretty quickly. I won't name him this morning, but this was not the first time he had harmed a young woman, and he didn't try very hard to cover his tracks. He was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. And let me tell you something this morning. **Nobody in my little town wants forgiveness for that man.** Even people who are against the death penalty in general are willing to make an exception in his case. Even people who I know, just like us here at Epiphany, heard Jesus say "forgive seventy times seven" last Sunday don't care in the least whether or not there is actually forgiveness this side of the grave for him. The attitude about this abusive and murderous man in my hometown is that God can forgive him if he wants, but not us.

Friends, when we are talking about objectively bad people, not just hurt feelings, forgiveness is hard. Really hard. Almost impossibly hard. Forgiveness can feel like robbing justice.

Friends, Jonah has a point.

> Jonah wants, expects justice from God. These Assyrians have murdered and tortured their way across his nation. I'm sure Jonah knew people they had murdered, just like I knew Dru Sjodin. Friends no wonder Jonah responds the way he does here in chapter 4. No wonder he's always **feared** that God, instead of righting the terrible wrongs that the Assyrians did was going to do something else. Look at the second half of verse 2, and try hard, hard to hear it as the accusation it is here in Jonah 4. *"I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."*

Friends, the book of Jonah pushes us up against a really tough reality this morning, one that we sometimes like to gloss over. **God's mercy extends all the way to truly terrible people, including people that have hurt us, and hurt people we love**.

> When Jesus says we are to forgive 70x7. He doesn't just mean your friends at church with whom you have had a misunderstanding. He means them.

And here is the kicker, because God wants to have mercy on terrible people, sometimes terrible people don't get what they deserve.

> While Jonah does not want mercy for the Assyrians, and has very good reasons for not wanting mercy for them, God does. While my entire hometown of Pequot Lakes, Minnesota, desires no mercy at all for the murderer of Dru Sjodin, God is abounding in steadfast love, even for him.

So, why does God want to forgive terrible people? Why does God want forgiveness **from** you for the people that have been terrible **to** you?

Well, there is an answer to this question. God demonstrates the answer to Jonah here in Jonah chapter 4.

And I have to say, I love how gentle God is with Jonah.

He doesn't command. He doesn't demand. Instead God asks, and God shows.

> Start by looking at verse 4, and remember Jonah has said his piece, announced his "fear" that God would be merciful, and then headed for the door, so to speak. God doesn't stop him. Instead he asked a question. *"Do you do well to be angry?"* And guess what, Jonah does think he does well to be angry. Remember, the Ninevites are worth being angry at.

So God doesn't force the point. I'm reading more into the text than what it says, I admit, but I think in part this is because God actually respects Jonah's anger. God knows Jonah has been hurt.

But what does God do? Well, God shows Jonah the **mainspring of his mercy**, even mercy for terrible people.

> It happens like this. Jonah is watching Nineveh from a distance -- he is watching to see if God really is going to forgive the instead of destroy them. The sun is scorching. It's hot. And God causes a plant to spring up to provide Jonah with some shade from the heat. It says Jonah was

"exceedingly glad" about that plant. But the plant isn't forever. Verse seven of Jonah 4 says *"God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered."*

And guess what, as Jonah sits, hoping against hope that justice, not mercy falls on the terrible people of Nineveh, he not happy about this shade-giving plant dying. Again, he says *"it is better for me to die than to live."* (v. 8).

And God questions Jonah again *"Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"*

But this time, after he hears Jonah's second firm word in favor of his just anger, God goes for the jugular.

Look at verse 10 of Jonah 4. *"you pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons?"*

Jonah can find his way to pity simply because something is useful to him, even though he didn't plant it or make it grow. God pities Nineveh, because it has 120,000 people in it he created, that he "planted and grew"

The mainspring of God's mercy for all people, even the terrible ones, is that he is the creator of all people, even the ones that go terribly wrong.

Friends, **the mainspring of God's mercy for all people, even the terrible ones, is that he is the creator of all people, even the ones that go terribly wrong**.

In some ways, this is not a comfortable fact.

But it is the truth.

So, what does it mean for us to know this about God? Well I am not sure it makes forgiveness or mercy easier. Our hurts will still hurt. Nineveh's repentance did not bring back the people they killed in Israel.

But it does explain the mainspring of that troubling mercy of God, mercy for our enemies. I may not like it, but I can understand why God would so prioritize having mercy on every last member of his own creation.

I can understand why God demands that we value his creation as much as he does, and offer forgiveness even to those in our lives who don't deserve it. I am glad our God is one who looks to bind up what he has made, instead of grind his creation under his feet when they are broken.

But there is one more thing. Remember Jonah's fear that God would have mercy on Nineveh? Remember how he said, *"I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."*

Do you know where he got that description of God's character from? Hint: It's in the Bible.

> It comes from Exodus chapter 34, when God reveals himself to Moses and gives him the 10 commandments. It is at the heart of God's covenant with his people.

Gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

> This is always who God has been to his people. It is the foundation of his relationship with his people from the very beginning. This is who God still is to each of us through his Son Jesus Christ. After all, the story of God's forgiveness for his flawed but beloved creation is the story of the cross in a nutshell, isn't it? We are objects of God's mercy, while our sins are objects of God's wrath. Jesus receives God's just wrath, so that we can receive God's great forgiveness.

Friends, in the end, **forgiveness is hard. As hard as a cross**.

We must practice it because we have each received that cross-hard forgiveness ourselves.

Forgive! You have been forgiven.

Amen

The Lamb of God Is the Son of God

Exodus 12, John 1

Early on a November morning in 1861, just a few miles from here at the Willard Hotel in Washington D.C., Julia Ward Howe woke with a tune she knew running through her head - but with new words.

> Julia quickly got out of bed, found an old stump of a pencil, and all at one sitting wrote those new words down. Her hymn became one of the most well-known and well-loved songs of the Union during the Civil War, the Battle Hymn of the Republic. We don't sing it much anymore, but my guess is most of us know it at least some of it by heart. The first stanza goes like this. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword: His truth is marching on.* Within a few months, her words were picked up and published by the Atlantic Monthly. Soldiers and citizens across the North quickly made "The Battle Hymn of The Republic" their anthem. For the next four terrible years of bloodshed, men in Union blue went to war singing the Battle Hymn, answering the howling rebel yell of Confederate armies with "Glory, glory, hallelujah, Our God is marching on."

Now, it goes without saying that nothing like this would happen today. It's been a long, long time since the Atlantic has published hymn lyrics.

Our nation is a much more secular place than it was in 1861.

But even if we weren't so secular, it's hard to imagine the Battle Hymn of the Republic taking off.

> Why? Well, because it is fundamentally a hymn about God's **wrath** on a sinful nation with the consequences being paid by everyone, no matter which side they were on. *"He is trampling out the vintage where the Grapes of Wrath are stored."* Isn't just about the South, it's about the North too. And there is judgment on individuals as well in the Battle Hymn. The third verse goes *He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat.*" And finally, God's wrath and judgment will take hundreds-of-thousands of lives on both sides. The Battle Hymn seems to even welcome that. The final line of the last chorus is "*As he died to make men holy, let us **die** to make men free, While God is marching on*." As the years have gone by, this verse has become harder and harder to sing. In fact, most versions of the Battle Hymn today have changed "***die** to make men free*" to "***live** to make men free*"

The truth is that the Battle Hymn carries embedded in it both a robust understanding of God's wrath and judgment, and a **celebration** of those things as an explanation for the Civil War.

The Battle Hymn is **glad** for God's wrath not just on the South, but also on the North. It casts the terrible tragedy of the Civil War as a much-deserved judgment on an unfaithful nation, North and South, that allowed human slavery to flourish for so long. The Battle Hymn encourages those swept up in the Civil War to accept the possibility that they may be both instruments and victims of God's judgment. Julia Ward Howe clearly saw the deaths of the nation's soldiers on all sides as some sort of payment, a propitiation, for the national sin of slavery. And she got people to sing about it. Can you imagine that working today?

So, God's wrath on a nation, judgment, death. These are hard themes for us these days more than 165 years on from the end of American Civil War.

But these themes are still out there - we find them again and again in the Bible.

This morning, we hear them in both our Old Testament reading in Exodus chapter 12, and in our Gospel reading from John Chapter 1. Beginning in Exodus 12, we have the account of the 10 plague on the Land of Egypt. Before this tenth plague, God has brought storms and hail, locusts, flies, frogs and gnats on the Egyptians in order to convince them to release their Hebrew slaves. He has afflicted them with boils, he has even turned the Nile to blood. And each time, Moses has gone to Pharaoh and said, "Let me people go." But Pharaoh will not. Instead he increased the burden on the Hebrews. And even before that, he ordered the death of every Hebrew son. Pharaoh will not let them go. So there is a final plague, a final judgment, against the nation of Egypt. God tells Moses: "*About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the hand mill*" (Exodus 11.4-5). There is no other way to say it, this is a terrible plague, a terrible judgment. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose my firstborn child, much less to be in a nation where every family was plunged into the same grief in a single night. But there is also a hard justice to it. Pharaoh had taken the lives of the Hebrews' sons. Now, God will take firstborn son of Pharaoh and of the entire land of Egypt. But there is a way to be protected from this plague. There is an offering, a propitiation, to make. Look at verse 21. Moses tells the people of Israel, *"Go and select lambs for yourselves, and kill the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood. and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood."* The text continues: *"For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door"* (v. 23).

Here also, just as in the Battle Hymn, we find the sin of **slavery** - against the Hebrew people, and **judgment** on a nation - Egypt. And we also find a propitiation, a blood sacrifice that protects a people from God's wrath - a **lamb**.

A lamb, or more precisely, a lamb's blood smeared with hyssop on the lintels and doorposts protects the Hebrew firstborn.

Now, you may remember that I said we find this same theme, wrath, judgment, and propitiation in our Gospel reading today from John 1.

God's righteous wrath against us, natural born sinners that we are, is satisfied by God's righteous son, who is the Passover lamb of God.

But we find it in a very different way, don't we? Here we don't find God's wrath and judgment, out in the open. But in John 1, we do find God's final solution for them, the Passover lamb. John the Baptist announces him, *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* in verse 29. Friends, sometimes you will hear people claim that the Bible is just a disconnected hodge-podge of spiritual writings. Don't you believe it. This morning, we need Exodus 12 way back in the second book of the Old Testament to make sense of John 1, verse 29 in the 43rd book of the Bible. Without Exodus 12, we would have no idea why John was calling Jesus a lamb.

These passages need each other. It's not an accident.

Exodus 12 tells us that sometimes it takes God's righteous wrath, judgment and even death to set slaves free from bondage, and that **the blood of a lamb** can provide protection from the destroying angel. **John the Baptist** announces in John 1 that **God has provided that very lamb**, the sacrifice to bear all the wrath, judgment and death we deserve in order to free us from our universal bondage of sin. And that lamb is his son, Jesus Christ. John says in verse 34, "*I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."* And isn't that amazing? **The Passover Lamb of God is the Son of God!** The cost of the Hebrews' exodus from slavery was the firstborn sons and daughters of Egypt - arguably innocent as individuals of the sins of their parents against the Hebrew slaves. But now, when it is time to offer the sacrifice, the propitiation, for each and every slave to sin through all time - Israelites, Egyptians, Northerners and Southerners, you and me - **it is God's own son who is the sacrificial lamb.**

So, yes, many of us struggle to make moral sense of God's wrath, with his judgment, and with death as we see it work its way out in passages like Exodus chapter 12, or even in an event like our own Civil War.

I think this is mostly because it has become more and more difficult for us to look the truth in the face, the truth that our spiritual starting point isn't as "good people on God's side," but as sinners facing his entirely justified wrath just as much as any Egyptian on the night of the first Passover, or any American in any state in 1861. Ephesians 2, verse 3 says, that not just by our actions but by our nature, we are deserving of God's wrath. But we wrongly think that by nature we deserve God's love.

Now, God absolutely does love us, but not because we deserve it, far from it. And, just as importantly, it is true that as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 9 "*God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

But the only reason that is the case is because: **The lamb of God is the Son of God!** There is a stark beauty here I hope we can see together this morning. It is this: **God's righteous wrath against us, natural born sinners that we are, is satisfied by God's righteous son, who is the Passover lamb of God**. He is the protecting sacrifice, not just for the Hebrew people, but for all people, for each of us, for you for me.

Friends, I want to close with a quick reminder. In a few minutes we will be celebrating our weekly Passover meal at Epiphany, the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus, on his last night with his disciples before his death on the cross instituted it to forever recall and make present his Passover sacrifice for sin. When we eat this bread today, when we drink this cup today, the body and blood of our sacrificial lamb, we are like the Israelites, a people on a journey, from slavery to freedom, from death to life. But unlike the Hebrews, the Egyptians aren't our just enslaving enemies, we are also the Egyptians. We are both slaves set free from bondage and sinners, by all rights facing God's wrath, redeemed by God's grace. God has once, and for all, provided the Passover lamb for all his people. **The Lamb of God is the Son of God!** Amen!

It’s the Church

Revelation 21.1–4, 22–22.5

Take a minute with me this morning and call to mind your first memories of church.

> Try to be there again for a moment. What do you see? Who do you see? How does it feel? How does it smell? I'm serious about the smell. Churches can have a smell, right? To me, church smell is old hymnals, Bibles with a touch of mildew, some ozone from the sound system, and maybe some Murphy's Oil Soap from cleaning the pews.

My first memories of church are very early in my life. I am not sure I was even talking yet hard to believe I know, but yes, there was a time I didn't talk.

> My stand-out moment is from a little Baptist church somewhere in central Iowa. There were wood pews, and I was still so small that I couldn't quite see over the top of them. And on the Sunday that I remember, the church was celebrating communion. Communion in the Baptist churches I knew growing up worked differently than it does here at Epiphany. Instead of all of us coming up and getting a little wafer and a sip of communion wine, the Baptist church ushers passed around big trays with individual clear plastic glasses of purple grape juice, and then silver plates with little cubes of white bread. When everyone had one of each, we would read Jesus' words about doing this "*in remembrance of me*" and all eat and drink together. But children couldn't participate. There are theological and practical reasons for all of these habits of celebrating communion that I knew growing up. These days I have many opinions about those reasons, but we'll save that for another time. You are disappointed. I can see that. But just like the pews went over my head, all the theology of what we were doing that Sunday did too. I didn't care about the reasons then. Instead, all I remember was a strong feeling that it was deeply unfair that the adults were getting snacks at church and I, a kid - the person present for whom snacks were naturally for - wasn't! Kids at Epiphany who wonder why you don't get snacks (and their parents). I see you.

I have other early memories of church as well.

> I remember singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" at the top of my lungs during Sunday school. I also remember getting bored in sermons that I thought were too long, or too repetitive, which was a lot of them.

When I catalogue all those memories, there is no question that I have more good memories from church than bad ones. I am grateful for that. I hope the same is true for you as well. And if it's not, or if a bad memory or two loom large this morning, let me just say thank you for being here anyway.

> Churches are very human institutions, with human strengths and weaknesses, along with that weird smell of books, mildew, and Murphy's oil soap. And that means human stuff, the good,

the bad and the ugly, happens in churches. Amen? Amen!

But that human stuff isn't all churches are. Not at all. They aren't just memories, mildew and Murphy's oil soap.

My first experience of church as something more than the sum of its parts, of church as something profound, holy, and beautiful that I could not explain or make happen by believing hard enough or doing well enough, came much later for me, when I was in college.

I went to school in a cold, flat, windy and dark place, otherwise known as Moorhead, Minnesota.

> On a cold, dark, windy Wednesday night in the middle of winter during my sophomore year, I got invited to something I had never been to before. It was this thing called Evensong at a little Prairie Gothic Episcopal church built in the 1890s that was a couple of blocks from campus. It was named "St. John the Divine." It had one of those historic building signs out front. Even the name was weird to me. In the world I grew up in we didn't call people saints on principle, and while something like a good dessert might be called "divine" or someone might look "divine," but I didn't know what it meant to call St. John "the Divine." I found out later, it was just an old way to identify the John who wrote Revelation and the Gospel of John, rather than John the Baptist, or anyone else named John you might want to name your church after. Anyway, on that dark, cold and windy Wednesday night, I went to St. John the Divine, out of curiosity more than anything else. I had never been to Evensong before. Plus, I was told we would be going to Applebee's afterwards. When I got to St. John's, I have to admit, it did not look very promising. I was one of maybe a dozen people in an antique wooden building. It was so old, there were steel tension rods every 15 feet or so to hold the walls together. We filed in. We each were given one of these little booklets. We took our seats and quickly launched into what for me was another world.

We confessed our sins and heard forgiveness spoken over us.

We called on God to help us and the whole world.

We sang the psalms to each other verse-by-verse.

We heard whole chapters of the Bible read aloud and quietly let God exegete them in our hearts.

> I had never experienced church like that before. Suddenly, very unexpectedly, I was caught up to a place where God and his beauty, goodness and holiness was the central fact of life, and all of us were moths circling that glorious living, and also dangerous, flame.

Now, maybe you are wondering, Peter, why are you telling us this?

> *Might it be because your sabbatical is starting next Friday, and it's easier to be autobiographical rather than exegetical when you are preaching your last sermon before being gone until mid-August?*

Well, probably guilty as charged on that.

Another reason is more explanatory. Have you ever wondered why we are so darn formal at Epiphany? To make it more personal, why I seem so deeply committed to worship, to liturgy, to old hymns, to odd outfits, and even some archaic practices, and seem to turn away from the modern tools of Christian church craft and activism?

> I mean it's not that I don't know those modern tools. I grew up in the very middle of them as a Baptist Camp director's son. It's not just that we are Anglican. Lots of Anglican churches run away from, or at least tone down various traditional Anglican things. They see how close they can get to the "best practices" of American corporate Christianity as it has developed over the last few decades. Why don't I get with the program? Well, it is because it was in these old Anglican things that I first met God at church instead of just humans. It was in these things that I saw that beyond the mildew and the Murphy's Oil Soap, that church was something so much bigger and more beautiful. Not only that, I saw that it wasn't up to me and a good stage show, but up to God to make it so. For me, it's also evangelical. I want others to see it too, to meet God like I did. We focus on helping people encounter God at Epiphany. This is one of our tools. Of course, tradition isn't everyone's path to encountering the Lord of the Universe in all His beauty of holiness, but it was my path, and as such it's the one I know best and have walked the most miles on. It's the way I can guide on most effectively.

So, talking about this explains me a bit, and explains how we share the Gospel at Epiphany. Noted. Is that it?

Well no. There is a final reason I am talking about this right now. Beyond the pre-sabbatical autobiography and explanation, beyond me, there is something more important

There is the Bible. Turn with me now to the very end, our New Testament reading this morning from Revelation chapters 21 and 22.

> What we are seeing here is the climax of the entire book and in a way the entire Bible. We are past the letters to the seven churches. We have seen all the scrolls read and seals opened and judgments enacted. We have seen Satan defeated and cast forever into the lake of fire. Everything that needs doing is done.

Except one thing.

> Read verse 2 of Revelation 21 with me. *"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her bridegroom."* And verse 3. *"And I heard, 'behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.'"*

Now, all of this sounds great, right? Jerusalem, God's holy city, recreated. God living there, in the middle of his people, forever.

But have you ever wondered what this image of a city in Revelation 21 and 22 is meant to communicate? We might try to understand it as a literal prophecy about the future, right? Many people do. At the end of time, all the Christians who have ever lived are going to be gathered in a massive, 12,000 stadia square - 1,500 miles square - megastructure and live there forever with God (v. 16). And just for the record, that's not actually impossible. The internet says are 2.5 billion Christians who have ever lived, give or take. If Jesus returns today and we each get a spot in the New Jerusalem megastructure, everyone will receive a half-acre squared. That's much bigger than my lot in Chantilly.

So, that's one way to understand this passage, literally.

Or, instead of counting out half-acre lots, we might want to keep things vague and metaphorical when we read Revelation 21 and 22. In that way of reading Revelation, this description of the heavenly city is just another way of saying God wins in the end, and that those that follow him will be rewarded. And that's most certainly true.

The great mystery of the church is that it is not local or universal, present or future, visible or invisible, but all those things all at once in every place it is.

But what if I told you the real meaning of God's city in Revelation 21 and 22 is easy to see, and, weirdly, harder to believe than both of those options? **What if I told you God's city, the new Jerusalem, beautiful, triumphant, victorious, and magnificent, is a concrete thing you know very well. What if I told you that we were inside it this morning. What if I told you it was God's church?**

I am convinced it's true. I am convinced it's true because that's what St. John the Divine tells us here in Revelation 21 and 22 about this city.

First, notice how he describes the New Jerusalem: *"prepared like a bride adorned for her husband."*

John is not just turning this phrase because he thinks weddings are pretty. Paul uses it in Ephesians 5, telling husbands to love their wives and Christ loves the church, *"so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing."* Sound familiar? John the Baptist calls Jesus the bridegroom in John chapter 3.

So Jesus is the bridegroom, the church is the bride, and John says the New Jerusalem is a bride.

Second, it is what St. John the Divine says about the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22.

Look at verse 14. What are the foundations of the New Jerusalem? Well, there are 12 of them, *"and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."* Look at verse 22. Is there some other worship place, some other church, in the New Jerusalem? No. *"and I saw no*

temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty, and the Lamb." Look at verse 24 -26. Who is in this New Jerusalem? All the nations. *"They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations."* In the new Jerusalem we see the church's evangelical responsibility of bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth and incorporating all people into God's people fulfilled. Finally, Look at verse 3 of chapter 22. What happens in the New Jerusalem? Worship. *"the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."*

So, the New Jerusalem is founded on the Apostles, superseding the temple, lighting the nations, and worshipping forever before the throne of God and of the Lamb.

All of this sounds a lot like the church, right?

That's because it is the church. The church at its best, the church when it is more than the sum of its parts, absolutely, but still the church.

Let's end with a couple of take-aways I want to leave you with as I go on sabbatical this summer.

First, the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22 is not just the church in the future. It's the church now.

We, the church on earth today, we don't do any of these things perfectly. But we do them all. It's how we know who we are. And by we, I don't just mean "we" in some abstract sense, but I mean "we" as in church of the Epiphany, gathered here, this morning, in this place and in this time. The great mystery of the church I first experienced at St. John the Divine is that the church is not local, **or** universal, present **or** future, visible **or** invisible, but it all those things all at once in every place it is, whether there are two or three people in the room or 10,000. Friends, this morning, we are part of a heavenly reality that beggars the imagination.

Second, because the church is at the very climax of the story of everything, **there is no following Jesus without the church. The church is necessary, not optional** to be a Christian, for you to be a Christian.

Friends, of course. Each of us as individuals has to choose to follow Jesus for ourselves. And it is also true that when all is said and done, it's not just each of us and Jesus at the end of time and the beginning of life and joy and beauty and holiness everlasting, but all of us together. **It's the church.**

That's the reality each of us is privileged to be a part of this morning at Epiphany. **It's the church.** Do you see it? We are meant to. Even if it is just a hint here and there.

Friends, in the end (and the beginning of everything good God has for us). **It's the church.** Amen