

Life Shared in the Paradise of God

Revelation 22:1-5

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (New Revised Standard Version)

Commentary

The picture of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 is drawn from the image of Paradise in Genesis 2-3. The new world God is creating in our midst even now is portrayed in Revelation as a return to the Garden of Eden. John makes clear throughout his report of the revelation he received from Jesus that the new world is even now breaking into our midst (Revelation 1:12-20) and will soon be completely born (1:3; 22:6-7, 10, 20). In this “in-between” time the church now inhabits, disciples of Christ are called to live by the rules of the new world coming (1:3; 22:7, 14, 17). The link between Revelation’s vision of a world transformed “for the healing of the nations” and the Genesis story of Paradise lost has significance for how Christians today should live our lives and how we should think about the nature and use of the wealth we create.

The Eden story is the second of two creation accounts that begin the book of Genesis. From the very beginning, we see that this is not a newspaper account of something that happened “somewhere over there, way back when.” It is rather a story of universal truth, a story that shows us what it means to be human whenever and wherever we are. The original human is simply Adam (*ha-’adam*), “the Human.” His companion is Eve (*chavah*), “the Living One” or “the One Who Causes Life” -- i.e., the Mother of the Living. The precise but impossible geographical coordinates that chart the courses of the four branches of Eden’s river (2:10-14) define the outer boundaries of the known world in ancient Israel. The River of Eden thus encircles the entire earth as they knew it. The Garden of Eden then stands at the source of the whole inhabited world where the Original Couple once lived but can never return. This is a story about about the pain and joy of knowing right and wrong, of sensing that life could be better, but not completely knowing how to make it so. This is the story of us all.

Two basic problems move the plot: the earth is barren (2:5) and the human is alone (2:18). The departure from the first creation story is striking in this regard. In chapter 1, humans are created from the very beginning in community, male and female. They

come to life in a lush world, full of plants and animals. The Eden story, by contrast, begins with an earth that is universal desert, desolate because “there was no human to till the ground” (2:5).

God creates the human and places it in an oasis that even has a tree of immortal life in it. There is only one rule in Paradise: do not eat fruit from the tree of knowing right and wrong.

Up to this point in the Bible, the only thing God has ever really said about the world is that it’s “good” or “very good.” But now for the first time, God offers a negative assessment: “it is *not good* for the human to be alone” (2:18).

In the process of trying to correct the problem, God creates all the animals of the earth, none of which turns out to be a “corresponding equal” for the human. Finally realizing that the only suitable companion for a human is a human, God spits it in two and, for the first time in the Eden story, we get gender-specific language. The “corresponding equal” is “woman” (*ishshah*), and the Human now for the first time becomes “man” (*ish*).

Though distinct and different, the two come from one flesh and therefore are drawn to each other. This splitting of the human into different but equal beings and their need to reconnect forms the cornerstone of human social order, the household couple. Separation becomes the occasion for union; but it also sets up an ongoing dynamic between the two, as couples raise children who will leave them for other unions.

Unity between people, in this telling, is not a state finally to be achieved, but an ongoing activity, a never-ending process of coming together even as the cycles of life pull us apart.

By the end of the story, the human couple are alienated from one another, from God, from the serpent who urged them to seek wisdom, and finally from Paradise and its tree of immortal life. At the root of this series of disasters is the human desire to be wise, to know the difference between right and wrong, to be moral.

Adam is not a particularly admirable character in the story. The text says that he is standing right beside the woman the whole time she’s talking to the serpent (3:6). He doesn’t object when she suggests that they eat the fruit of knowing right and wrong. He just chows down. But as soon as he realizes he’s in trouble with God for what he and his companion decided together to do, he starts blaming the woman, the snake and even God! “The woman you put with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate” (3:12). Notice the sequence of pronouns and verbs: you put, she gave, I ate. We’re right to roll our eyes at this point; but in his comical attempt to deny his own guilt, Adam bumbles into an important truth: God shares part of the responsibility for the way things turn out in the story. The desire to know right and wrong becomes an issue only after the human is no longer alone. It is precisely the God-given social nature of human beings that makes wisdom, moral discernment necessary.

God's solution to the problem of human loneliness leads inevitably to the human desire, the human need to know the difference between right and wrong. When you're the only show in town, you can pretty much do whatever you want. It's when you have to live with someone else that you have to start figuring out rules, that you have to put limits on yourself and share resources. Human community is impossible without some sense of justice, some ability to figure out what's right and what's wrong, some way of determining how the good things of life will be shared. The plurality of human being, our social nature requires moral discernment.

Traditionally, Christians have spoken of the Garden of Eden story as the story of "the Fall." And in one sense that's the right way to think about it. We pay a steep price for the power of moral judgment. Shining the light of justice exposes the injustice that lurks in the shadows. It is painful to become aware that there are good things and evil things in this world. There are things we find out that we wish we didn't know. There are situations we face where there are no good options; where we want to do the right thing but have no idea what the right thing could possibly be; where whatever you do, whichever way you go, somebody's going to get hurt; where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Knowing right and wrong comes at a steep price. In a very real sense, it is a "fall."

But it's a fall upward. It's like stumbling up the stairs. It really is better to know than to not know. It's better to see what's wrong and to do the best we can to make it right. Ignorance is, in one sense, bliss; but it's better not to live our lives in a state of childish denial. And the truth of the matter is that we really don't have any choice but to grow up and take responsibility for the bad things as well as the good things of life.

The minute God solved the problem of human loneliness by creating community, the die was cast. The quest for wisdom, judgment, moral discernment, justice had already begun. Maybe that's why God put the tree there and the snake there and strolled off for awhile to let whatever would happen happen.

The woman and the man left alone with the tree and the serpent decided that having moral judgment was worth the risk of losing Paradise. They gave up endless life in utopia for the wisdom to live in human community, for the joy and the pain that come with human companionship and with knowing right and wrong.

Now that humans have the power to know the difference, the only thing separating them from God and the other heavenly beings is their mortality (3:22). So God expels the couple from Eden and puts two cherubim there to stand guard.

Elsewhere in the Bible, cherubim are the winged creatures that stand in the holy of holies at the center of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 25:18-22) and the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6:23-28). They are the guardians of God's throne, and all communication between God and the people comes "from between" them (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89).

The story here seems to be making a connection between Paradise and the Jerusalem temple. The temple where the cherubim stand guard is the earthly point of contact, the Eden story implies, between the mundane world of mortal life and the heavenly world of God. At the temple, we catch a glimpse of Paradise, but we cannot enter in.

In the end, the story comes full circle and takes a surprising turn. Banished from Eden, the man and the woman go out into the barren world to till the ground. By choosing wisdom and leaving Paradise, the human couple becomes the solution to the problem that introduced the story. They enter the desert world where there is “not yet any plant of the field or herb of the field” because “there was no human to till the ground” (2:5), and they farm. With utopia now out of reach, humans venture into the world, wise to what is right and wrong, and they bring a bit of Paradise to the wasteland. With God’s help (4:1), by the work of their hands, the wit of their minds, and the community they share with each other, they create wealth, support families, and make the desert bloom.

The final vision of the book of Revelation (chapters 21-22) draws its images and themes from the story of Eden. In the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem, John sees the gates of Paradise once again opening and the nations of the world now invited in.

We know from the letters to the churches at the beginning of the book (chapters 2-3) that Christians in John’s time were experiencing varying degrees of pressure to live by the values of imperial Roman culture. Some apparently had even died as a result of their attempts to resist (Revelation 2:13; cf. 6:9-11). John’s revelation is a vision given by God to show faithful Christians what’s really going on in all of this and “what must soon take place” (1:1). It is a “revelation of Jesus Christ.” It both belongs to him and is about him. By uncovering the spiritual reality that undergirds history in that difficult time, Jesus shows John and those who hear his report that the Risen Christ, though unseen with the naked eye, in fact stands with the churches as they struggle to keep faith in a time of distress and temptation, where courage, patience, and conviction is required for faithful Christian witness (1:12-20).

A repetitive cycle of visions follows the letters to the churches, in various ways dramatizing the current predicament of the faithful as the tip of the iceberg in a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil. The visions come to a climax with the disappearance of the current world of injustice and suffering. In its place, a new heaven and earth appear (21:1). In contrast to the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 (and to popular apocalyptic scenarios today), humans do not “go up” to be with God. God “comes down” to be with humans. A new Jerusalem descends to earth from heaven, the gift of God who comes to live with mortals on earth (21:3). On the renewed earth, in the renewed Jerusalem, there is no temple, no cherubim to guard the tree of life, to gate-keep access to God, because God’s presence is immediate, unmediated, through all and in all (21:22).

The Human and the Mother of the Living who lost Paradise to gain moral discernment, to live in human community have, with God’s help, given birth to the nations of the earth. They have built great cities, created great wealth, become mighty empires.

Knowing right and wrong, they have all-too-often chosen violence and evil. They have allowed fear, jealousy, and greed to consume them, to drag them into the burning sea, the bottomless pit of destruction and death (Revelation 19:20; 20:1-3).

But in the new world that God is bringing to earth, in the New Jerusalem that is appearing in our very midst in this very time, the gates of Paradise are opening and the nations are invited in. They walk by the gleaming light of the holy city filled with the presence of God. The nations stream in, the rulers of the earth bring their glory through gates that never close (21:24-25) because there is no night there. God is their everlasting light.

Like Eden, the city of God has a river. It flows out from God, but, unlike the river of Eden, the river of New Jerusalem does not leave Paradise. There is no need, because God has created a new heaven and a new earth and Paradise has no end.

The river of life flows through the middle of main street to water the tree of life whose luscious fruit blooms year-round and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Thus the biblical story comes full circle. The end returns to the beginning. Paradise lost in the first times is finally found in the last, not by reaching to the heavens, but by living now in the unmediated presence of God who comes to earth and lives with mortals.

In the final analysis, nations healed, people reconciled, God and humans at one are not goals to be achieved by human effort, but gifts to be received from the hand of God and shared throughout the world.

As the heavenly vision makes clear, that gift is not a heavenly reward in a far-off future. It is immediately near (22:6-12). Wholeness is not a distant result we may someday achieve. It is a way of living on earth now in the presence of the Risen Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end and everything in between. In this vision from God, at long last we see that we are free to bring the wealth and glory of once-barren earth back into Eden -- some of it ill-gotten, some of it justly won, a hodgepodge of good and evil, even as we are a mixture of right and wrong. At long last, we are free to love, to give without fear, to live boldly, to drink from the pure river of life, to eat sweet fruit from the tree that grows there, to touch the leaves of the tree of life and be healed.

Possible Sermon Points

- At the end of the Garden of Eden story, human beings give up a life free of problems and concerns to do the hard work of living in real community. Living together means living with limits. But working together brings blessing and prosperity. It “makes the desert bloom.” The vision at the end of Revelation calls us to join all the nations in bringing our wealth and “glory” to God’s work of healing the world.
- We tend to have a bifurcated view of wealth. On the one hand, we celebrate the super-rich and harbor suspicions about the moral worthiness of the poor. On the other hand, we unleash populist anger at the well-to-do and are tempted to think of wealth

as inherently “dirty” or “evil.” We rightly make judgments about degrees of evil and good. A small personal slight is not morally equivalent to genocide. Going 10 miles over the speed limit is not the same in God’s eyes as murder or rape, as some versions of “original sin” would hold. The Eden story doesn’t say that, but it does insist that none of us is pure. Our wealth and our production of it are the results of our best impulses and our worst ones. Our material goods exist in the world because we have rejected utopia and accepted the responsibility of living in human community that is a mixture of right and wrong. That’s just the truth of the human condition. Revelation’s vision of a new world, an open-gated Paradise God is creating in our very midst, calls us to use our wealth, as good and as bad as it is, to live as best we can by new rules of healing, sharing, and life-giving love.

Worship resources

Call to Worship

God is our light! The gates are ever open! Let the nations stream to the city of God! Let the peoples drink from the river of life. Let everyone eat from the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations!

Amen! Come New Jerusalem! Come Lord Jesus!

Opening Prayer

O God of Wisdom and Life,
we answer your call.

**We enter your gates
with thanksgiving
and praise.**

Accept us now
and the fruits of our labor.

**Make holy the gifts
we now place before you
for your work of healing the world.**

Amen.

A Litany for the World

Chalice Hymnal 664

Call to offering

Paradise eludes our grasp; but God throws open the gates and invites us to enter. Let us bring the fruits of our labor, the gifts our hearts and lay them beside the river of

life. Let us share living water, taste the fruit of life, and thus consecrate our wealth and our work to God for the healing of the nations.

Call to communion

At this table, we share healing fruit, we drink from the fountain of life. Here our eyes are opened and we see Paradise taking shape in our very midst. A new world is born in our very midst! Come to the table of Paradise! Eat the bread of healing! Drink the cup of life! Share the feast of the Risen Christ!

Benediction

May God Embrace Us

Chalice Hymnal 449

*May the God who dances in creation,
who embraces us with human love,
who shakes our lives like thunder,
bless us and drive us out with power
to fill the world with her justice.*

Possible selections from *Chalice Hymnal*

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee	2	
Shall We Gather at the River	701	
Pues Si Vivimos (When We Are Living)	536	
Lord, You Give the Great Commission	459	
God of the Fertile Fields	695	
All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly	419	
Now We Come Before God's Presence	410	
For the Fruit of All Creation		714
For Beauty of Meadows	696	
This Is My Song	722	
Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ	422	
I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table	424	
We Are Walking (Siyahamba/Caminando)	442	
Psalm 100	752	
Psalm 67	744	

Rick Lowery is Affiliated Professor of Hebrew Bible at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Adjunct Professor of Hebrew Bible at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky.