

"The Best of Places"

Matthew 23:34-39; Revelation 21:1-5

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 28, 2018 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

Jerusalem is an ancient city in a modern world, a beautiful place that has also had more than its share of problems. It's one of the world's oldest urban centers and goes back at least to the tenth century B.C. when King David made it his capital. In America, going back two centuries is something to note. Can you imagine 30?

Jerusalem has been a major city throughout history, yet it has no significant waterway or outstanding natural resources. It has been conquered and ruled over by Canaanites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Saracens, Arabs, the Crusaders, Ottoman Turks, and finally the British before it won independence with the establishment of Israel in 1948.

From its earliest days Jerusalem was a strategic site. Even in times of relative peace it's been prone to instability with internal factions of one kind or another plotting to gain dominance. Today, like yesterday, it's a place of intense political turmoil and integral to the future of the Middle East as a whole.

Then, too, Jerusalem is sacred to three of the great religions of the world— Christianity with its Holy Sepulcher, Islam represented by the Dome of the Rock, and Judaism with its many revered sites such as the Wailing Wall. It was the home to prophets like Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah.

Jesus also trod those old and narrow streets of Jerusalem. The New Testament records his presentation as an infant in the Temple; his trip as a boy of twelve; his Passover visits, especially the one where he cleansed the temple of its corruption; his curing of the cripple at the Pool of Siloam. On his last visit to Jerusalem he ate with his disciples in the upper room of a borrowed house, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, was questioned in the palace of Caiaphas, and walked his last mile to Golgotha.

Modern Jerusalem is a geographical place, a city of hills and houses and hotels, but it's more than this: it's a state of mind. The past, present, and future all come together in this one site. Perhaps more than any other city, Jerusalem is truly the crossroad of the world. Every action there brings about some reaction.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem—so much is expected of you. How often, though do we hear of disappointment due to the sins of your people. How often has you been devastated by occupying forces and laid low. Whenever there is a predication of a restored Israel, however, there is usually an accompanying vision of a renewed Jerusalem like this one from Isaiah 66:

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight."

From earliest times it is usually cities that have been the center of human activity rather than the countryside. The city was always the hub of political and cultural life. It was the center of economic transaction and commerce. It was the seat of learning. Humanity's highest aspirations are reflected in its magnificent buildings, both sacred and secular.

Yet, side by side with the city's loftiest ideals has been its tarnished side. Here was starvation next door to plenty, corruption amid its vitality. Here were mighty accomplishments shadowed by utter degradation. The outward face of the city is its most civilized profile, but its counter side is ever present. The city always has been the best of places and the worst of places. There's a general feeling that, in the city, humanity's destiny will ultimately be determined.

Almost all of us here are residents of this major Ohio city, or a part of its environs. It is a metropolitan region with more than 2 million people. We are included in its fabric whether we recognize it or not. Columbus goes out at least 40 miles from its core and incorporates both suburban and rural sections in its whole. Your mailing address may say Powell or Worthington, but it is still part of the larger population area that shapes it.

Some cities are much smaller than this one, but still dominate their region. Back a few years we spent a beautiful fall week in Vermont. Though we travelled around the state, we stayed in Montpelier, the capital. This seat of government is smaller than Delaware. Its pace is energetic, but not frantic, and a nice change from Columbus.

We get used to so many things as normal in a big city, like the violent crimes which fill our newscasts. We almost forget that it might be different elsewhere. One morning I tuned into the local radio station to get the weather. After national and state news it ended with this local item: "And locally, police were called to 112 Loomis Street to investigate a complaint of loud music and a stomping of feet."

No carjackings, no raids on crack houses, no holdups with automatic weapons, no gang fights. But there was loud music in Montpelier. I had visions of cloggers being hustled away to jail, along with their bluegrass records. Now that's a bit refreshing after what we're used to hearing. I'm sure that Montpelier does have its share of problems. Vermont is not Utopia. Still, it gives some hope with other cities on the brink of chaos.

Some years ago there was a promotional slogan for Central Ohio that asserted: "Columbus: we're making it great!" Someday the Chamber of Commerce will probably dust off this motto and give it another go. Maybe it can be the pitch for the new Amazon offices.

The slogan made me think just what it is that makes a city great? Does it mean adding population? Constructing buildings? Opening golf courses? Perhaps it could be any of these, though none alone equates with greatness. A city could evidence all of these, and still not be a good place to live.

If it's not these things, then what is it that makes a city great? Well, certainly it would include some standard "quality of life" measurements. The locale would need a livable environment where basics like air and water are of decent quality. There should be balanced land usage, with adequate green space and recreational areas. The city needs a stimulating cultural climate and education has to be a high priority. Businesses should be generating enough jobs so that those who need to work can work.

A great city should value its young people as its best asset. No child should have to go to bed hungry, or sleep on the streets, or grow up feeling that life has passed them by. Adults should be ready and willingly to act as positive role models. The twin problems of poverty and hopelessness must be effectively addressed so that they don't become feeders for crime.

Importantly, there should be a healthy spiritual environment with faith communities willing and able to both pray and act. We can't tolerate the fragmentation and distrust that exists today among people of good will. All houses of worship must find ways to build bridges instead of barriers.

To be a great city you'd need all these qualities, and even more. If you look around today you'll see that our cities are indeed the best of places...but also the worst of places. They are where great things can happen, but also where the most appalling atrocities occur. We need a compassionate concern for our cities, just as when Jesus wept over Jerusalem for what he saw there.

In the Book of Revelation we hear God's promise of a new city for the people: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth and I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. And I heard a loud voice saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. The Lord will dwell with them as their sovereign; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them, wiping every tear from their eyes.'"

How would we relate to a new Columbus coming down out of heaven, where God's sovereignty is evident to all? How would we react to a new place in our midst where people celebrate and commit themselves to this kind of new reality? No, I don't think some overlay is going to drop out of the sky to replace our current life, but I believe we are given a vision of the way things could and should be. What we would do with such an image is largely up to us.

Where God is given a rightful and central place, where lives are continually being changed for the better, where citizens believe and practice the Golden Rule, then here heaven and earth begin to connect. When these conditions are present the promised City of God will start to show itself in earthly form. When we bring our best our cities will be constructed with building blocks of love and concern rather than with those of greed and power.

Even now, even in our brokenness, the more God's vision for life gets placed first in our hearts and in our actions, the more we can bring forth the best in the places we live. That can start now, even as we wait for the New Jerusalem of the world.

You see, more police officers won't really make a city great, or further shopping, better roads, or expanded sports. Instead, it will be the people themselves as they have a sense of new birth, an increased desire to live in harmony, a greater hopefulness for the future, and a willing commitment to bring about a better life for everyone. As Jesus makes abundantly clear, our well-being and our neighbor's are fully intertwined.

When we recognize God's place in the world, then we understand our place. When we act on what we believe, we will be about building our cities with real concern for all.