

In the beginning, it was wet and dark, one big monstrous sea, or a sea monster. You choose. The ancient writers tell us that God tamed this boggy, swampy chaos, added light and vitality, and molded all of creation.

God also reshaped some of that chaotic water into a big river that nourished a garden, and flowed east out of Eden, breaking into four branches. And you know how the story proceeds. The first family learned about accountability and responsibility; they were introduced to concepts like grace and community. For the most part, they made good choices, and I suppose a few questionable ones, too! (Lord, don't we all!!!). Pretty soon, their children constructed cities. Some of these cities got SO big and SO powerful that their leaders stopped acting as created beings living in created entities, and started acting as the source of creation themselves. In Babel they built a tower to make a name for themselves. Why wait for heaven to come to you when you can ascend the heavens for yourself?

The tower in Babel fell. And others, too. God imagined, intended, and indeed created spaces of mutuality, partnership, and love. Humanity kept insisting on spaces of domination, privilege, and independence.

It's the false narrative of all times, ours included: the powers that be continuing to insist that empire is authentic and permanent. "The garden has been cleared" they say, "paved over with rigid and cold brick and mortar."

But lucky for you and me, ours is a faith tradition that dares to defy, reject, and confront such a short-sighted narrative. Stone empires are the façade. God's garden is the truth. God's garden is being renewed; spring is just around the corner; this is soil that can be worked by everyone AND feed everyone, too.

And lucky for us, ours is a faith tradition whose stories bear witness to the stubborn, persistent, generous growth of God's Garden. Jesus talked a lot about seeds and soil. He also had a way of sowing and cultivating his own form of seeds. I'd argue that his disciples, the ones back then, and the ones right now, harvest moments of mutuality, and partnership, and love.

And it's interesting, Babel wanted to wall itself in, keep others out, build a grand tower, speak a uniform language, hoard its resources. But when God's spirit comes at Pentecost, a kind of restoration occurs. A thousand tongues, all heard and understood, in heart, soul, and mind. And open gates, full of travelers. Diversity. Abundance. Creative expression. Empathy and compassion. God's presence in the present. Garden not empire!

And that brings us to today's text, an excerpt of John's vision in Revelation. And I know, I know, many of you have a complicated relationship with this letter. Still, I think this is a helpful paragraph. Because for me, what John is envisioning is the return of a garden. And oddly enough, the garden's return isn't, I repeat IS NOT, accompanied by demolition, or clearing, or destruction.

God is doing a new thing. The heaven we keep trying to construct, and the earth we insist upon have gone away. Gone, too, is that menacing sea monster. And there's a new city, a Holy City, a better, more approachable, more present Jerusalem. And that city is just as eager to see us, join us, partner with us as we might be to reconnect with the ones we love. It's like two lovers glancing at one another on their wedding day, that moment where they make known their eagerness to partner in life together.

But pay attention. There's no talk of bulldozers flattening and demolishing. There's no talk of displacement. And there's certainly not any talk of stacking bricks to build skyscrapers. God's dwelling is making its way toward us; God's home is among God's created.

I like this New Jerusalem, I love this new Jerusalem. God is accessible. God is a co-creator. God is a dinner guest. God is a neighbor. God is our God. And we are God's people. Nobody's been expelled from God's presence. Nobody's been scattered. Nobody's been flattened. Nobody's been forgotten. Nobody's been zapped. God is gathering and this is God's gathering!

Gone, too, are pain, and tears, and death. I think that's a poetic way of saying gone are all those falsehoods empire marauds as truth, those things that drain our living. Gone are all the wounds we afflict and receive because we pursue stuff instead of spirit, transactions instead of relationships. Gone, gone, gone are the

A New Jerusalem
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All Saints Sunday
Revelation 21:1-6a



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

first things. And here, here, here, right now is a garden. God intends to tend this garden, now, and forever more.

We read John's words at funerals, and we read John's words on All Saints Sunday, because they SO SO clearly depict God's movement in the world. We get so busy, so twisted up, that too often we think that God is moving away from us. But that's not true. God is moving toward us. And God is ultimately determined to dwell with us, to care for us, to love us, to see us realize our created potential.

The saints we honor and remember today are echoes of John's vision. In millions of tiny moments, some more noticeable than others, their lives have revealed for each of us tangible examples of collaboration, love, faithfulness, service, and joy, just to name a few. How do we as Sardis Baptist Church know of God's investment in our lives, and indeed in all of creation, forever and ever? Because the saints have told us so, and shown us so, and loved us so, again and again and again.

And maybe this inbreaking, new Jerusalem, is simply that point in time when there is such an infusion of saintly, kin-dom moments, that we no longer take heed of empire. We no longer allow towers to be constructed in our gardens. We live in our days in mutuality, and partnership, and love. We stop running from false forms of enough-ness. We slow down long enough to realize that God's pursuit of us is not hostile; it's affectionate. And God being God, God's people being God's people, together, finally live into God's world.

Good friends, may our hearts be brave, and our arms be strong, as we seek to help till, plant, and grow God's coming garden.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.