

“A ‘Gooder’ Place”

Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

Sharlande Sledge
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On one of my first trips to New York, I kept going back to the Stage Deli in Times Square cross the street from our hotel because the chicken noodle soup from the deli’s pot seemed to be the best medicine I could find for my cold. But I think I *lingered* there for another reason. In New York, I knew that in a crowded diner I would likely be seated at a table with a few others already eating their soup. And I would likely get to eavesdrop – or even enter – conversations with other people at the table.

The movement and pace of city life is humanized for me by the people whose paths cross mine for even a few minutes: people like the Egyptian taxi driver, who showed me pictures of his beautiful nine-month-old daughter; or a woman named Tanya in Prague, who lifted me to my feet and guided me as far as she could toward help after I crashed face-first into the sidewalk; or the Ethiopian cab driver who waited for me at Bread for the World’s office Washington because he said my walk back through the neighborhood to the Metro station could be dangerous. My spontaneous encounters in the city – which at first seem to be the “around the edges” experiences of my trip – turned out to be the highlights. Yet I’ve always wondered about whether I could live in the city for the long haul.

Americans living – or visiting -- in big cities like New York or Los Angeles or Houston are familiar with the stress of overcrowded streets and sidewalks and the interminable search for a parking place, even here in our own little city. Just think of getting across I-35 to Baylor these days! We think our cities are crowded. But not a single American city ranks among the 50 most densely populated urban areas in the world where it seems impossible to walk without bumping into pedestrians every second.

The density is caused by more births than deaths, by people moving to cities for jobs or forced off rural land by natural disasters, by skyrocketing land prices. Brittany and Casey tell us about living in Chengdu that has a population of 9 million in the city proper and 14,000,000 in the agglomeration of the administrative area.

But Chengdu is not as large as Sao Paulo or Mexico City or Dhaka, Mumbai, Beijing, Cairo, Lagos, Istanbul or Kinshasa. Each of these cities is populated by 20 to

21 million people. Shanghai has 25 million; Delhi, 29 million; and the Tokyo/Yokohama area, 38 million.

And then there are geographic populations that swell in size when thousands of people live close together because of their poverty or war or natural disaster. These are huge population centers that have grown up at the Mexican/United States border or in camps such as Zaatari in Jordan where 78,000 Syrian refugees now live, the city some of them may live in for the rest of their lives.

Once, at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, I heard Marian Wright Edelman, now director emerita of the Children's Defense Fund. She told the story of one of the millions of children struggling to grow up in a world of chronic violence. Eight-year-old Gail's words about life in inner-city Washington, D.C. made me shudder. They still do:

In my neighborhood there is a lot of shooting. One day after school me and my mother had to hide from the fighting. There is a church and a school that I go to in my neighborhood. It's safe for me in those place. But there are mean people who live in my building; they broke into our apartment twice. By King High School Susan Harris and died. It so hot that day. It was in the newspaper. When me and my mother was going to church we could see the fire from the 4424 building. I was not scared. In my neighborhood there are too many fights. I have never been in a fight. God is going to come back one day and judge the world. Not just my neighborhood. I believe in God and I know one day we will be in a gooder place than we are now.

Will Gail's vision of "a 'gooder' place" ever be realized? The Bible says "yes" because "a 'gooder place'" is God's vision. "A 'gooder place'" is God's home. "A 'gooder place'" is a restored community where God will dwell among us. Gail is living with John's kind of faith that all will be made new.

When John peers beyond human history, with all its "dangers, toils, and snares" -- all that would make us fearful or homeless or hopeless -- a city is what he sees! In the presence of the God of resurrection and life; pain and death will have no place. This God-among-us will wipe away every tear from the eyes of people. The old things that brought fear and loneliness and despair will be gone.

John does not say, "People will not be *as* sad -- or not *quite as lonely* as they were before -- or *not as likely* to be victims of violence." There is more to this new life than the elimination of the things that bring the greatest pain to a girl like Gail or any other of God's children. In the new creation we are promised no chaos, no death, no despair, no crying. God aches to see the old order with its tears and death give way to the new God has promised. Because of the resurrection we know that God has the

power to overcome the world's worst work and make something new. God will be at home among us.

Even if we peer over John's shoulder, trying to get a complete picture of the new city he describes, our down-to-earth experiences are such an organic part of who we are now that we can't imagine what will be. All our wildest dreams and all the goodness Gail's – or our – minds can conjure is finally not good enough to comprehend how God's life among us changes our world from old to new. The One who said, "See, I am making all things new" also said to John. "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

In this yet another week of noise on the news, compelling voices rose above the uproar in Washington. We heard Greta Thunberg at the UN and David Brooks at Baylor and the Convention Center. Greta, of course, called us to pay active attention to frightening concerns about our vanishing environment and Brooks invited us to engage in his vision of creating spaces where individuals can come together to work toward the greater good, or as he said, "We practice doing life together."

Think of the organizations in our small city that are based on the belief that when we work together, our collective gifts and abilities can make this a better city for everyone who lives here: Mission Waco, Meals on Wheels, the Texas Hunger Initiative, Prosper Waco, the November Feast of Caring for the Hungry, Habitat for Humanity, the Baylor School of Social Work, Act Locally, Lake Shore Baptist Church. They – WE – embrace the city with the shelter of our hands and hearts and the vision of our minds. For us, Jesus's disciples, every act of vision, love, and compassion is a sign of God's reign on this earth.

T. S. Eliot wrote, "What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?" I hope that's why we "huddle" and worship and then take our love and worship into the world.

John, the writer of visions of a new city was, we think, the same John who wrote the words we call "the gospel of John." In that gospel John tells us that on the last night of Jesus' life at his last meal with his disciples, Jesus gathered his disciples around him as "little children" and gave them "a new commandment" that would be the foundation stone for building a new community in the world.

"Little children, love one another," Jesus said, "just as I have loved you. Jesus knew he would be with them only a little longer. He needed for them to be caregivers to each other and to others as they built their community. So Jesus gave a new commandment to them – and to us: "Love one another."

Our love-one-another signs of the new world may not always be magnificent or visible or immediately effective – they may be small signs like building a bed a bed at the Salvation Army or taking some muffins to someone who can no longer come to church or cleaning a playground or painting a fence at Talitha Koum.

God doesn't ask any of us to try to meet the breadth of the needs of the world's cities or even to offer our gifts among the millions in Chengdu – or in Kigali – or in Dhaka – or Kabul – or Rio – or Amman -- and even Mexico City or New York. But God still calls us to "love one another" in the ways we can. This new commandment is echoed in Carrie Newcomer's words:

"I can't change the whole world,
but I can change the world I know
what's within three feet or so."

Whatever we call what God is creating – "a gooder place," "the reign of God" or "a new heaven and a new earth" or "the New Jerusalem" – we get glimpses of it through the signs we see in the lives of each other, the ones Jesus called "little children," no matter whether we are twelve or eighteen or thirty or fifty or sixty or eighty or almost a hundred- the little children who have a chance to help build a new city "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Once in New York – a city that's not really so large after all by global standards -- I saw what was for me one of those signs. A simple sign, you may think, but it made a profound impression on me. I've told this story before. Listen again to my memory from years ago, exactly as I wrote it then:

About 7:00 I was walking toward Central Park on 75th Street on a block lined with brownstone houses when I noticed an elderly gentleman walking very slowly and shakily, not too far in front of me. He was nervously tapping his cane along the sidewalk. Even from behind him I could tell that the tapping began right in front of him and moved across the sidewalk in a distinct pattern. He made an arc, tap by tap, inch by inch until his cane was three feet to the right. Once each fragile movement of the cane was complete, he shifted his weight forward an inch or two and started tapping another arc to be sure it was safe to take a step forward. In the dusk dark each crack in the sidewalk must have seemed like the height of a steep cliff to him, the potential edge of disaster.

I was caught between the thoughts of "Should I help him?" and "How in the world did he get this far by himself?" In the space of my hesitation, I saw a young couple bound up the steps to their nearby brownstone, carrying groceries. When they saw the gentleman, the young man handed the keys to the young woman, set the groceries down, and hurried back to the sidewalk.

He leaned over to talk to the old man, evidently asking him where he lived. By that time, the old gentleman, steadied by his young neighbor, had the courage to sweep his cane through the air and point farther up the street.

I against someone's porch for fifteen minutes. I watched the men, who seemed lost in conversation, as they inched up the street, passing only a couple of brownstones in that time. Then I crossed the street and watched a little longer until the approaching darkness rushed me away.

It's an hour later now. I wonder if the two men are still walking up the sidewalk toward home and why the outward ideas of the city had made me think so long about whether to be a neighbor that I'd missed my chance. But what a wonderful picture of the city I saw!

Our God is not a God who looks down from above, observing the world as a tourist on the 85th floor of a skyscraper – nor from the top of The Alico Building. God comes as the Christ who walks beside us on the street level of the city, not to observe as a curious bystander at a safe distance – but to lend us a steadying arm and a shoulder to lean on when the world as we know it is bigger – and perhaps more lonely -- than we can imagine.

We're city people, you know. God of the old city is making all things new, including us.

Prayer: Oh, God, we're waiting for "a gooder place." But signs of your love are all around us. Give us the courage to bring healing to this world, to be signs of your goodness, till the earth bows before you, lost in wonder, love, and praise. Amen