



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## **Its Lamp is the Lamb Revelation 21:22-22:7**

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**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.**

**And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.** (Genesis 1:1-5)

So begins the great story. And it goes on. The Lord speaks and the land appears and brings forth every kind of plant. The Lord speaks and creates the heavens, then fills them with the sun, the moon, the stars. He fills the sea with fish and brings forth animals to roam the earth. And finally he creates human beings, male and female, to bear his image—to be the priests of his temple and to have dominion, to steward, this good cosmos that he made. They were to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and by implication to expand the Lord's temple until it encompassed all of Creation. And it was good.

The Lord planted a garden and in it he placed the man, and later his wife, to share in his fellowship. In the middle of the garden was the tree of life and from that garden-temple we're told flowed streams of water to nourish the earth. How long it lasted, we're not told. If we're meant to take it literally—which we really don't know—it wasn't very long, seeing as Eve's first child was born outside the

garden. The two bought the lie of the serpent and rebelled against the Lord. They broke the one rule they'd been given and, in doing so, grasped for divinity themselves. In that state, having access to the tree of life and the immortality it gave, would have been cruel and disastrous, so they were cast out and as the story unfolds in the chapters that follow, things went from bad to worse.

But the Lord did not abandon that which he created out of love and grace. Creation itself and the human beings that corrupted it were created good and the Lord would not only make them good once again—he would forgive and restore and renew these rebellious creatures and bring them back into his presence, to live at the headwaters of the river and under the leaves of the tree of life. Abraham. Isaac. Jacob. Joseph. Moses. Joshua. David. Israel. All signposts in the great story, reminding us that not even the worst of human sin and rebellion can ultimately derail the Lord's plan for his cosmos. In the midst of this broken world the Lord created a people for himself. He claimed a land for himself, he delivered them from Egypt and placed them in that land, and he dwelt in their midst in the tabernacle and later the temple—the greatest of the Old Testament signposts, pointing to a future in which he will set everything to rights and restore humanity to his presence. Creation cries out to be delivered from corruption and to have its stewards set right and restored to their rightful place.

The Old Testament prophets, living in the midst of Israel's troubles, looked forward to that day. The very existence of Israel as the people of God was a reminder that he's working to set things to rights, but Israel herself became emblematic of humanity's problem. Sin. Idolatry. Compromise. Worldliness. Unfaithfulness. The very people whom the Lord had redeemed and claimed as his own needed, themselves, to be set right. And so the prophets rebuked Israel,

but they did so in hope. We'll get to our text from John's Revelation in a bit, but first those prophets. We've seen how John draws constantly on their imagery and here, at the end, in Revelation 21 and 22 John riffs on Isaiah 60 and Ezekiel 47 and uses their imagery to show us the faithfulness of God revealed in the end as the great project begun in Genesis 1 and 2 is finally fulfilled.

Isaiah saw a day in which the glory of God would outshine the sun in a renewed Zion:

**The sun shall be no more  
your light by day,  
nor for brightness shall the moon  
give you light;  
but the LORD will be your  
everlasting light,  
and your God will be your glory.**  
(Isaiah 60:19)

Isaiah also writes of the Lord's city:

**And nations shall come to your  
light,  
and kings to the brightness of your  
rising...  
Your gates shall be open  
continually;  
day and night they shall not be  
shut,  
that people may bring to you the  
wealth of the nations,  
with their kings led in procession.**  
(Isaiah 60:3, 11)

It would be worth reading the whole of Isaiah 60, but that would take longer than we have this morning. Needless to say, it's a vision of both creation *and* God's own people set to rights and in that renewal God's glory is powerfully manifest. It was a vision that inspired hope in Israel. It was a vision that shaped the ministry of Jesus. And in Revelation 21 John reinterprets that vision in light of the risen Jesus. Look at Revelation 21:22-27.

**And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the**

**city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.**

At this point we shouldn't be surprised that the whole city is the Lord's temple. We saw last week saw that it's filled with his glory. And John described the city symbolically as an enormous cube—it's so large that it fills the earth, or at least sort of the known world of John's day—and it's a cube, a giant holy of holies. That was the part of the tabernacle and later the temple that held the ark of the covenant and the Lord's presence, the glory cloud, rested on the ark. All along, this is where the temple and the ark and the cloud of glory were pointing: to a future day when, even despite human sin, the project into which the Lord had called Adam and Eve is completed and his glory fills the earth as the waters cover the sea, as Habakkuk put it. It should have happened through the faithfulness of Adam and the faithfulness of his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but instead it has come through the faithfulness of a second Adam, through Jesus, and through the proclamation of the gospel by his Spirit-empowered new Israel.

And it's not just the temple that is no longer needed, but even the sun and the moon become redundant. Does that mean there will literally be no sun and moon in God's new creation? I think, like John's statement that there was no sea, this is symbolic language. That's the nature of his revelation. I could be wrong. Maybe in this new

creation the laws of physics and biology and the very structure of the cosmos itself will be transformed. I don't think so, but it's possible. But the point is that this new creation, this restored temple, is full of the glory of the Lord and his brightness outshines the sun. As John recorded these words he would have had the end of Exodus in mind—that awe-inspiring scene of the Lord's glory descending to fill the newly-completed tabernacle, his brightness in the midst of Israel's wilderness camp. It's the conclusion of a story of human blood and tears, but there at the end the love and the grace and the mercy of God triumph as his people gather around to worship. And yet, if we're paying attention to the bigger story, Exodus can't be the end. As glorious as it is, Israel's camp and even the tabernacle were a little thing, a tiny spot of brightness, in the midst of a vast world of darkness. Israel's camp still included sinners and uncleanness, despite the law. And the nations hardly took notice of any of it. Something more, something bigger had to happen. Exodus, like Moses and Israel and the tabernacle were signs pointing to something greater. And now John sees it. Finally, here's the fulfilment of the story. The great thing so amazing that John can only describe it by piling up symbols and metaphors. It's like *this* and it's like *this* and it's like *that*, too—oh, and also like *that* and *that* and *that*!

The city is full of the glory of God and the lamp—the centre and the source of that glory is the lamb—the one who was slain, whose blood and tears bought humanity's redemption from our own blood and tears. Isaiah had seen something similar, and yet I have to think that Isaiah was left in wonder as to how it all would ever happen. All he could say was that the Lord would do something so amazing that the nations would finally take notice and recognise him, coming to him in submission and to give him glory. And John sees it now. The amazing

thing the Lord has done is Jesus himself, the Lamb. It is his light that outshines the sun. St. Paul, in Romans, writes of grace abounding because of sin and here we see that as nowhere else. Adam new the light of God in perfection, and yet he didn't know it like this. The amazing thing, the Lamb who humbled himself to become incarnate and to die for the sake of his sinful people, reveals the glory of the Lord in a way Adam could never have dreamed of.

Are you familiar with the Japanese art of *kitsugi*? Broken pottery and ceramics are glued back together with lacquer and then the lacquer repairs are covered with gold. A bowl or a teapot can be a thing of beauty, they don't usually attract much attention. But break it and repair it with gold, and it becomes a thing of even greater beauty that everyone suddenly notices. That's the best thing I can think of to illustrate what John's getting at. Creation was glorious, but God's repairing of his Creation through the sacrifice of the Lamb is infinitely more glorious, just as Jesus is more beautiful for the nail scars in his hands and feet. He reveals the love and the mercy and the grace of God like costly gold highlighting the repairs of a piece of broken pottery. And, key here, no one can help but be caught by this vision of glory, of what God and the Lamb have done. They're captured by it. The only response anyone can give—you, me, all the nations of the earth—is to bow down and to offer ourselves in return, giving him the glory he is so clearly due. By the incarnation and by the death and resurrection of Jesus, that scene of glory, of the Lord descending to be present with Israel in the wilderness as the people gather around to worship and to live in his presence, that scene is multiplied a hundred thousand times over. Because of Jesus, the entire world now takes notice and gathers to worship in the light of his glory and to live and work in his presence.

So the darkness of human sin and rebellion, prompted a response from the Lord that is indescribably glorious. It shines so brightly that there is no night. And its light has gone out to the nations through the proclamation of the gospel and Isaiah's vision is fulfilled. This is a vision to inspire those little beleaguered and persecuted churches—and the church today—to stand firm and to continue to proclaim the good news about Jesus even in the face of martyrdom. By the light of the Lamb and his gospel the nations walk and come to the city to bring their glory and honour. This is what Israel was meant to be—a light to the nations—only more so and greater than any king or prophets could ever have imagined. Solomon's glory is but a shadow of King Jesus. The tribute of the Queen of Sheba is but a shadow of what the nations will bring to the Lamb. And, finally, the people of God is set fully to rights. Sin, evil, rebellion have been wiped from creation. Nothing unclean or false is present. There are no lying, stealing, greedy Achans to bring judgement on the people of God.

John sees Genesis 1 fulfilled through Isaiah's imagery and then he sees Genesis 2 fulfilled in the imagery of Ezekiel's prophecy. Ezekiel was writing during the Exile. The temple had been destroyed, but in his vision he saw it restored, and more importantly, he saw the glory of the Lord return to it. When Israel returned from her exile, she did rebuild the temple, but Ezekiel's vision of the return of the Lord's glory was never fulfilled—not until Jesus created a new Israel, a new temple, and filled it—us—with his Spirit. And yet even that is a shadow of what is to come. But what John draws on here is Ezekiel's vision of the temple as a new Eden. In Ezekiel 47 the prophet sees a river flowing from the temple—from the garden—and the further it flows the deeper it gets until it's so enormous it couldn't be crossed and at that point it flows down into the

Judean wilderness and down into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is dead. It so full of salt and minerals nothing can live in it. Its water is useless for irrigation. But Ezekiel saw the life-giving water of the temple make even the Dead Sea come to life. In his vision it swarms with fish and trees grow on the banks, bearing fresh fruit. Ezekiel writes:

**Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.** (Ezekiel 47:12)

John now sees the fulfilment of Ezekiel's vision. Look at 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; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, 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 night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.**

Ezekiel saw a restoration or a rebirth of Creation's state as we see it in Genesis 2, but John sees that renewal even more explicitly. Ezekiel saw a river bringing life to the dead. John sees that river irrigating the tree of life—the very tree that stood in the middle of the garden, the very tree that imparted the life of God to Adam and Eve, the very tree from which they were barred because of their sin. John sees it restored. He sees twelve kinds

of fruit, deliberately calling back to what Ezekiel saw, but also showing us a multiplication of the tree. As the river flows down the main street of the city, so the tree grows and flourish all down both banks of the river—not just a single tree of life, but tree after tree after tree. And it's not just to give life to Adam and Eve. The tree is there for the healing of—to give life to—the nations. What does that look like? I think the specifics are beyond the scope of John's vision. His point is just that the nations whose armies we've seen warring with each other throughout the book, the nations who were once enticed by the beast, his prophet, and the great prostitute, the nations that had once given themselves over to idolatry and every kind of wickedness, John now sees those nations transformed by the power of the gospel and faith in Jesus the Messiah. They've been brought into this new world, and the abundant fruit of the tree of life—this tree symbolic of the life of God—heals them. Like divine *kintsugi*, God's life heals the hurts, the griefs, the hatred, the tears.

From the holy of holies the river flows—the water of life—bringing healing and life to the nations. But John also sees that in response, the nations bring their worship to the city. What other response can we have to the love and mercy and grace so freely poured out to forgive, to redeem, to restore, to make new? But there's a difference between this temple and the temple of the Old Testament. In the old temple no one saw the face of God. In Exodus and again when Solomon built his temple, the people saw the cloud of glory descending into the holy of holies, but apart from that, the vision of divine glory was off-limits. The unholy cannot enter the presence of the holy to look upon it. Everyone in the Bible who ever had a glimpse fell on his face in fear. But here the redeemed nations of God's new creation worship in his presence. John says they see his face. Why?

Because the name of the Lamb is written on their—on our—foreheads. Because Jesus has marked us out as his own. Brother and Sisters, when we come to him in faith, submitting to him, and giving him our allegiance in baptism, by that water he marks us as his own. The minister may mark you with a cross on your forehead, but what Jesus does in that act is far more profound: he fills you with his Spirit and in doing that he's given each of us an earnest, a down payment on the life of God's new world—a life in which we, his people, become his very temple, a life where he lives in our midst, and we see him face to face, finally able to give him the fullness of worship of which our worship today is only a dim shadow.

But John doesn't stop there. We're not just set right; we're set right to fulfil the purpose for which we were created. John really does see Genesis fulfilled. "They will reign for ever and ever," he writes. The Lord said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, *have dominion over it.*" We see every day what a mess we've made of that vocation. St. Paul writes in Romans about Creation groaning in eager longing as it awaits our renewal and restoration and here, finally, John sees it. What exactly that will look like, he doesn't say. In this new world things have evolved beyond their original state in Eden. The Lord doesn't simply reboot the programme. Somehow he redeems what is good in human history and human development. The garden has become a great city, but the garden is still there. And, I think, our vocation will have grown and evolved in the same way. But at its core it remains the same: serving the Lord as the priests of his temple and working as stewards of his Creation.

Brothers and Sisters, it's not just pie in the sky when we die. John brings everything back to the present. Again, he was writing to those little churches full of persecuted and often fearful

Christians bracing for a tidal wave of opposition. He writes to them of perseverance in the midst of tribulation and reminds them that Jesus and his kingdom are real. Real today and giving hope for the future. He writes in verses 6 and 7:

**And [the angel] said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place."**

**"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."**

Stand firm. This is not all there is. Jesus would vindicate his faithful people. Judgement would fall, first on Jerusalem and then on Rome. And John saw that glorious vision of Jesus riding out on a white horse to conquer by the power of the gospel—and his church riding with him. It's a battle, but the outcome is already certain. And here at the end we see the fruit. We see the victory celebration that await. And the angel says, "Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." Blessed is the one who stands firm in faith. Blessed is the one who gives his allegiance to Jesus. Blessed is the one proclaims to the world the death and resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus. And blessed is the one who, filled the Spirit of God, lives out his or her priestly stewardship today—living today in light of the new creation to come. For Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Let's pray: Lord God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*