

"A Destination City"

Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:1-10, 22-27; 22:1-5

May 25, 2025

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

A destination city. It's the thing for municipalities to be, the hope of every mayor and economic development officer. It means that your municipality is so attractive that people want to make YOUR city their destination for vacation or business. For the cities that are able to cultivate their image and reality as a destination, it means income and employment for the residents, improvements to infrastructure and the hope for a better quality of life. And, hey, if that translates into some votes on Election Day, that's not too shabby, either!

A destination city. It's what the prophecy from Revelation describes. Yet the destination is not for business or vacation, but for a life with God. This vision is of pure spirituality, where there is no more pain or crying or tears. It is a vision of a ***new*** Jerusalem where the only light present or needed is the glory of God. It is a city without a temple, because the very presence of God is all the temple it needs. It is an open city where people will bring the glory of the nations and nothing unclean will enter. It is a city where the water of life flows, and the tree grows that—in contrast with the tree of temptation in Genesis—this tree has leaves that are for the healing of the nations. Wow!

We would not be faulted for saying "What a dream and what a dreamer." The writer ***had*** to be. The vision is that of St. John the Divine. As you will recall from previous messages, John was among many who were exiled for refusing to call the Roman Caesar Domitian "Lord and God." John was fortunate to be locked up tight on the island of Patmos, the Alcatraz of the Aegean Sea, for many of his contemporaries were killed for the same resistance. Yet John knew that temporal powers never have the last word.

What does this vision mean for us? Coupled with the experience of Paul in today's reading from Acts, this vision means two things: Never stop dreaming. Never stop working for the dream.

Never stop dreaming. Proverbs 29:18 reminds us “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” When the pressures and oppression of the daily grind weigh us down, there is nothing more powerful than a vision of what might be to lift hearts and minds to a higher horizon. Great strides in every field began with a vision of what might be. The Rev. John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, once replied to a letter from one of his preachers. The preacher bemoaned his many trials and tribulations. Wesley’s one sentence reply is a prescription for us all: *“You look inward too much and upward too little.”* The destination city of the godly life is found in a vision, a dream, of wholeness and hope.

Did you catch it? Did you catch what the writer Luke told us in today’s passage from Acts? It’s easy to miss. The apostle Paul was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Although Paul wanted to do God’s work, he seemed blocked at every turn. Did that ever happen to you? You want to do God’s work but are thwarted in your best intentions? Interesting how Luke interprets the blocked efforts. He attributes it to the Holy Spirit, forbidding Paul to go to Asia (what we would today call western Asia Minor, or western Turkey) and the Spirit of Jesus preventing him from going to Bithynia in northern Turkey.

Then Paul had a vision, a dream. In the dream he saw a man from Macedonia pleading, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” So immediately Paul, Silas and Timothy set sail across that same Aegean Sea to Macedonia. And in that moment Christianity was first planted on the shores of Europe, and that continent would never be the same again.

For some of us the inclination is to be more “hands on,” quicker to act and slower to dream, at times disparaging dreams, especially spiritual dreams. For us, C.S. Lewis offers this reminder:

“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men [and women] who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have

become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in:" aim at earth and you will get neither."

Lewis, C.S., Mere Christianity, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1977, p.118

Never stop dreaming of the destination city.

Never stop working for the dream of the destination city on earth. We know God means this vision for earth because of Revelation 21:16, which tells us the city is four square. In the numerology of Revelation, "four" is the number of earth. So our labor, inspired by heaven, is to make God's vision a reality on earth.

Some of you have been curious about last week's luncheon conversation with our young adults. I wrote briefly about that in last Wednesday's "*Living Through Grace*" article, with the comment that those young adults present were the best ones to answer the question "*How did it go?*" What I'll say here is that the conversation was robust and earnest. This was not a crew who wants to "play church." That is to say, they want to be part of something that makes a difference, for themselves and this world in which we live.

In that spirit we talked about many barriers that people place between themselves and others and between themselves and God. One of the more recent in the history of The United Methodist Church has been exclusionary policies related to human sexuality. Those policies were revoked a year ago after over a half-century of discrimination cloaked in theological and Biblical literalism. This church embraced those changes on Father's Day last year in a public meeting.

Yet as I said to our young adults, I often wonder, "What issue will our grandchildren and great-grandchildren look back on and say 'How could they think like that?'" For me looking back, I wonder how Methodists in 1939 could have agreed to the compromise that formed The Methodist Church, formed from three branches of Methodism that divided before the Civil War. The compromise placed congregations comprised predominantly of Black people in a separate administrative category, the Central Jurisdiction, based solely on race, a jurisdiction that was not abolished until...wait for it....1972. How could they do that, I wonder? I think how grandchildren will say the same of us on the matter of human

sexual identity. How could they have segregated and discriminated against people based on how God made them?

I also think future generations will look askance at how we deal with mental health, in particular as it relates to the abuse of both legal and illegal drugs: alcohol, prescription medication and opiates. Carol and I recently saw a play in which the actor told his own story of dealing with bipolar disease. The man aspired to be a professional golfer but his illness held him back. More importantly, the stigma of his illness made it difficult to find safe spaces in which to talk about his challenges and to find healthy ways to address them, rather than self-medication strategies of alcohol and marijuana. While this man told his story with self-effacing humor, the pain of his journey was clear, a pain that too often leads not only to despair, but suicide, especially for young people. We must continue to find ways to talk about mental health in ways that do not stigmatize, but strategize for wholeness.

Never stop working for the dream. One of our friends established a foundation named after their daughter who died of a rare disease. The Jamie Hulley Foundation supports the arts in schools in the New Haven and Bridgeport areas. The foundation's slogan was a favorite saying of Jamie's: *"What would I want with small dreams?"* Indeed. The last I checked, it didn't cost any more to dream big.

The destination city in Revelation is a spiritual dream, but one that is very connected to earth. Paul, responding to a dream, launched the church in Europe. Christians, the people of God's dream, have undertaken bold endeavors throughout history for the sake of God's dream. We, Woodbury United Methodist Church, the people of the dream in Woodbury today, are called to God's dream and to keep working for the dream to make our church and our community a destination city for all who seek the spirit and power of God. And we do it, as C.S. Lewis reminded us, with our minds on heaven. Because, as the hymn-writer declared, we *"want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem just like John."*

Please stand as we sing hymn #722, "I Want to Be Ready."