

SERMON: "THE CITY OF GOD: *The Two Cities & the Final City.*"

Rev. Geoff Ross: Sunday, September 20, 2020, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

*[Last week – Jeremiah: promise/plan-hope/prosperity]*

This week we look at Isaiah – another prophet who wrote/spoke/prophesied about cities – shows us the importance of cities/describes the 'city' as a 'good place' – a place they sing happily about! Surprisingly, the Bible has a more positive view of the city than many/Christians do today – this is because the 'city' was part of God's plan/design/purpose for God's people. The message was that "*Glorious things are said of you, city of God*" (Ps 87:3)/that God in his "*loving kindness/delivered the lost/hungry/troubled from their distress/led them by a straight way to a city.*" (Ps 107:7) In the Bible, cities were important because they – like today – set the culture of the people: if the citizens of the city/Jerusalem trample the poor, so will others. [This is why, in last week's Jeremiah reading, God's plan/purpose for the people of God was to move/live/work/serve in/love the city of Babylon – and, it's the same plan/purpose God had for the Apostles/early Church as they spread the Gospel/change the world: it's God's plan/purpose today/for us.]

*[City:Definition-(Latin 'civis' - 'citizen') "a large/permanent human settlement/densely populated/defined boundaries/walls/common-specified attributes. Primarily for safety – and for common protection:walls=security/safety/refuge;common-care=welfare off/for all. "Civis"/civilization=cities were the place where one went to be saved.... But the fall changed all that!]*

All of the Hebrew words for "city" used in the Old Testament mean "an enclosed place." The cities were originally places that were "safe." You see it in Genesis 11 when the people say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, ... otherwise we shall be scattered...." If you're scattered, you're vulnerable. So, to be strong, you gather. Cities were places where scattered/weak people came together and be safe: in fact, the first cities God told the Israelites to build were called "*cities of refuge.*" (Numbers 35:27) Why? Because God's plan/purpose for the city was to be a "*desired haven*" (Ps107:30): cities were meant be places of civilization/common-care/protection – merciful/safe places where scattered/lost people could come together. But cities – like the people who live there/built them – are also fallen places: meant to be places of refuge they are places of violence/danger; while aspiring toward human excellence they are known for corruption/exploitation/immorality.

*[In case you didn't see it/yesterday I asked how many times does the word "city" appear in the Bible (NRSV)? A lot! 926 (cities:247) – FYI: "grace"/129. "City" appears 1<sup>st</sup>:Genesis 4:17"Cain ... built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch." Last:Revelation – 26times! "Holy city,New Jerusalem"/"City of God"]*

The city was/is always part of God's plan for creation/us – with the City of God being our final destination, but, our fallen nature/history messed it up – for us. In many ways our history/existence can be described as the tale of two cities – both described in the Isaiah reading: the "*strong city*"/"*lofty city*"; the city of God/earthly city – and the tension we experience by living in the wrong one.

*[Say: Cities aren't religious! Wrong: City originally 'invented'/designed by God to be a place where we met Him-would be-with Him. Q: What were the tallest buildings/skyline of Brampton/Toronto/New York 150/172 years ago? Churches. Now? Bank buildings/temples to money. Instead of our cities aspiring/reaching upward/they-we are bound/earth-bound/grasping places where we struggle/toil.]*

Briefly, the 'lofty city' ("*humbled/laid low by God*" (Isa 26:5)) is the 'earthly city' based on pride not humility/self-salvation not God's salvation. The first example of this in the Bible is, again, in Genesis 11 – the building of the city/tower of Babel – where the peoples of the earth (not people of God) sought to "*make a name for themselves*" (God's ultimate power of 'naming') by not just building a city/tower but by seeking to bring about their own self-definition/creation/justification/salvation through performance/accomplishment-status/rank/power; a social order founded entirely on our own efforts/leading ultimately to death/dust. The 'lofty/earthly city' does not have 'perfect-peace' ("peace" said twice=perfection): it a place of oppression and power where poor are trampled to maintain because self-creation/definition requires that you're always driven/working/striving-restless/exhausted/nervous/fearful.

The 'strong city/of God' (Isa 26:1-4) is based on God's salvation/peace not us/our power, based on service of others/self-sacrifice instead of oppression and self-benefit. This city is marked/built by God's 'perfect-peace'/"shalom"('full flourishing') that define(walls)/protect(ramparts) it. This "perfect-peace/shalom" is complete in all who live within the city because it is a city of joy/infinite justice – joy/because you know who you are/known to God; justice because you have the inner peace/are in harmony/love with your neighbour in order to serve others. The city of God/earthly city; the "*strong city*"/"*lofty city*" – but where do we fit in?

Superficially, it would seem like they're mutually-exclusive/separate, and that we live exiled in the lofty/earthly city waiting, exhausted for God to bring about our salvation: but Isaiah says the city of God/strong city is present – here/now/always – and available/possible to us within the earthly/lofty city. This is what God(through Jeremiah) called the exiled people of God to do – that by being faithful they were the "strong" city/of God within the city of Babylon; and this is what Jesus taught/commissioned His disciples to do by living as the alternate 'city of God' where you are/to those around you.

*[1<sup>st</sup> half of Isaiah reading/promise/plan-hope: "Shroud"/linen burial cloth – John reading/wrapped Jesus'/Jesus destroys the shroud. "Shroud"=death conquered by God/Jesus-"swallow up death forever"/salvation. Isaiah: "God will wipe away the tears from all faces-death/sin-disgrace no more." Revelation: vision of heaven/eternity: "the home of God is among mortals. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; Death/mourning/crying/pain will be no more." (Rev 21:3-4)]*

This is the 'final city' – the future/city of God/heaven!(Isa 25:6-8) The vision of the banquet/feast/meal-fine wine/food/good company-for all peoples/'perfect peace'/healing of the nation's made possible through God's grace/Jesus' sacrifice. Friends,

saved/believing/restored, we're both 'cities'-saved/still here/of this world/heaven now – and as such, we have the power/pattern/ability to bring about the city of God, God's final vision of/for creation/us – not by looking to serve/save ourselves, apart from the city(it's people/needs/problems) but by faithfully being Christ in/to the city by seeking to love/serve/save others, as a part of the city(meeting the people/needs/problems) thereby transforming the city by being God's grace/'perfect-peace.' This was/is God's plan/purpose for each of us – and for St. Andrew's – which is why God has planted/placed us here; may God enable us to, in all we say/do, bring about the city of God in the heart of the city. Amen.