

LIFE-ENRICHING SCRIPTURE

JANUARY 5, 2020 SERMON

Revelation 21 (NIV): Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the

fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

When I was in China, I got the chance to escort a student home to Inner Mongolia, the north central province of China, which is actually Southern Mongolia but the Chinese have it. Anyway.

We don't generally hear a lot about Mongolia in the US. Mongolia is part of the **central Asian steppe**. It's mostly cold, scrubby desert. The people live in yurts. The people of the central Asian steppe are the reason China has a Great Wall. **Mongolians Genghis Khan** and his grandson **Kublai** just went around it and conquered China.

Genghis Khan was the greatest **conqueror** the world has ever known, in part because he didn't spend a lot of energy on keeping the places he conquered. For the most part, he just conquered them and moved on. If they stopped sending him the stuff he wanted every year, he sent people back to destroy them again.

The conquests of Genghis through his grandson Kublai went from Poland to Korea. From Southern Russia to India and Afghanistan. To give perspective, his lands went from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, the long way. Genghis Khan and his warriors killed 10% of the total world population in his time.

So I'm in Inner Mongolia, and we're driving, 4 adults and three kids in an old Volkswagen Jetta—across Inner Mongolia, and no one could tell me where we were going except that it was going to be awesome. After three hours of driving, we show up at this huge tourist site in the middle of nothing. My student's family was so excited. It took me a good long while to figure out that this was Genghis Khan's mausoleum. There was a huge temple that was obviously not that old. There were recent replicas of Mongolian artifacts. There was a set of bleachers so you could sit to watch Chinese people pretending to be Mongolian people riding horses. I looked at the other American there and said, "Does this seem a little weird to you? Are you buying that Genghis Khan is actually buried here?"

He said, "Oh, Genghis Khan isn't buried here. No one knows where Genghis Khan is buried, but it's definitely not here. It's an empty mausoleum. There's no body."

I said, "So we're at his mausoleum, which is the the one place in all of Eurasia where we absolutely know Genghis Khan's body is **not**?" Finding out the tomb was empty just took all the meaning out of it for me. But I got to ride a camel and roll down a sand dune on the way home, so it was okay.

I told you the story about Genghis Khan's mausoleum for a couple of reasons. The first reason was to introduce you to Genghis Khan so I could tell you this story.

Most of the Central Asian steppe tribes fought each other — the Tatars, the Uighurs, and those who spoke the Mongolian language. It was Genghis Khan who unified the Mongolian-speaking tribes into a single tribe, who gave them the idea that they were a nation. Together, they were able to confront their enemy tribes and get them to join them or leave the world. Then they left the steppe together and attacked the people they felt had been pitting them against each other for centuries — the Chinese. And then everyone else they could reach by land.

When Genghis Khan attacked his first real city, it was unthinkable for everyone involved. They'd never done anything like this, and the city they attacked didn't know how to respond. Weren't they a bunch of nomadic shepherds who fought each other? How were there so many of them? When it became clear that the Mongolians were hardcore warriors who were going to win this battle, the leader of the city offered gold, silver, and precious stones to Genghis Khan. "We'll give you wealth. We'll make you rich if you'll just leave us alone."

Genghis Khan looked at all the silver and gold he was offered, and he asked how it was wealth. He says, "Can I ride it into battle? Can I feed it to my people or my horses? Wealth is horses and goats and warriors and wives and children. This is just heavy piles of metal. It will slow us down." Mind-boggling, isn't it?

And that mind-boggling story of Genghis Khan takes us straight to the heart of today's scripture. Here is the high point of the Revelation of John, the description of heaven, the new heaven and the new earth. I heard of the pearly gates and the streets of gold of heaven my whole life. I heard it preached that heaven was going to be where we got our reward, where we had a mansion just over the hilltop and where we would walk the streets of purest gold. And heaven sounded like rich. And it was stuck in my mind. Heaven is full of riches. It doesn't matter if this life is tough, we're going to be surrounded by fabulous in heaven.

But in my study of the Bible, I came upon an interpretation of the book of Revelation that said the core point, the central point of the entire book of Revelation comes at the beginning of this chapter. And I've preached and taught about this before. Books and stories of the Bible often have a **chiastic structure**, like half of an x, an arrow (if you're Mongolian), that lays out the stories to a central point, and then backs out of that central point by reflecting the earlier stories with this new

understanding. The argument was that main point of the whole book is that the sea, what the Romans used for international trade, was destroyed. "There's no longer any sea" means there's no longer any international trade, which early Christians felt was a social evil in the ways that it was accomplished and further impoverished and enslaved people.

The interpretation then, the reflection out of that on the rest of the chapter, is that the streets are made of gold and the gates are made of pearl because — those are just building materials in heaven. There's no other use for them anymore.. They're valueless. And if you think about it, this kinda rings true with things Jesus said. So in heaven, what is precious on earth is just rocks and cement. Just like they appeared to Genghis Khan — those things were not wealth to him and they won't be in heaven. And that's a very different vision of heaven. Heaven looks the same with this interpretation, but our human value for those things is gone. It takes us outside our own values to see God's reality.

And that is what scripture is for. It is a chance to get a glimpse of God's reality. It's God's revelation of self. That's why we have scripture. There's a lot of disagreement on this — is it historical, is it factual, is it divinely written or divinely inspired? Here's the core point — it's scripture. These are the words God wants us to have that somehow reveal God's reality to us if we will engage. The entire library contained in this book is an act of revelation.

Often, when we do devotional Bible reading, we read little snippets that might encourage us to keep on or that reinforce our belief. Sometimes that's what we need. But scripture does not exist to reinforce what we already believe. It is there to reveal God's self to us. And as you can see with today's scripture, which is hopeful and positive, there is another way to read it that keeps it hopeful and positive but also challenges us to reevaluate even how we think about heaven.

Scripture reading is an important spiritual practice. You'll see scriptures printed in the bulletin this and every week that you can read. I'll be reading them along with you. Sometimes they'll pop up in the next week's messages. But it's not about checking the box that we got them read. It's about really looking for God revealing God's self in them, seeing what new thing we learn from them, letting them pull us outside what we think we already know they mean, letting them pull us from our values into God's values.

Just like this American in Chinese Mongolia, we always approach scriptures as foreigners to the cultures they represents. So it takes additional work for us to wrap our minds around what God is saying through it.

And here's the other reason I told you the story about Genghis Khan's mausoleum. Scripture will point us, again and again, to the importance of an empty tomb, a mausoleum with no body in it. And if we engage with scripture, we will find meaning in the emptiness of it. Value in emptiness, and riches empty in value. It's mind-boggling. It's scripture. And it's here for us to struggle with — to struggle as foreigners to the culture and as believers who are willing to let ourselves be changed by God's revelation.

God's word is full of ideas, full of wild stories, full of interesting things. But most of all, it's full of God trying to show God's self to us. Trying to show us what is real and what matters. God reveals God's self to us in scripture. Are we open to the revelation? Amen.