

## Magic and Metaphor: Bringing New Jerusalem to the Earth – Hannah Marshall

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 5:1-9

I love fantasy books. The magic, the world-building, the creativity of the author—whose imagination births strange creatures and impossible cities and new languages. What I love most about fantasy is its ability to create metaphor for the real world in which we live. Stories like Ursula K. LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, where a young man must come to terms with the darker aspects of his humanity as he battles a shadow he has conjured into the world, or Patricia McKillip's *Riddlemaster* trilogy, which grapples with humanity's responsibility for stewardship of the planet and questions traditional gender roles and marriage. Fantasy can reflect reality, point out flaws in our thinking, or reimagine the world as a better place.

Today's passage from Revelation has some seriously magical imagery, and I think, like fantasy, it contains metaphors which are helpful for living our real, messy, day-to-day lives. Listen again to this excerpt from our passage this morning: *And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb....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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

Talk about some glorious world-building. I picture this landscape as a cousin to Rivendell or Narnia, silver waters sparkling with sunlight, perhaps some majestic horses grazing on the lowlands, and this magnificent, magical tree spreading like a great oak over both sides of the river—I guess it has two trunks? It's like the wonders from *Arabian Nights*: the singing tree, the waters of gold. We need only the bird who speaks to complete the trinity—and I suppose we get the Lamb upon the throne instead.

This city is described as a utopia, perfectly measured, perfectly maintained, and always perfectly sunny. Okay. So who would like to live in a place like that? I have to admit, for me, the sheer brightness of this picture is blinding. I'm terrified of a world in which everything is perfect...my tendency is to wonder where the shadows are, to peel back the layers to reveal the dystopia underneath (and now I'm thinking of the precise world of Camazotz from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle). In the same way, while death terrifies me, so does heaven—an eternity of perfection? How could that **not** go wrong?

And yet.

What is this utopia really about? I think it's meant to be a blueprint. You know how when things are all laid out, perfectly to scale on a nice 3D computer model, without a blemish in sight? That's New Jerusalem. It's an idea of what **could** be, not the thing itself. It's metaphor, image, meant to evoke feelings of longing that will, hopefully, send its readers out to make a world more like the one pictured.

New Jerusalem is a place without a temple, *for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*. It's a place where people *bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations*. A place without hunger or hurt. It's...heaven, right? Or shall we call it New Earth? A place where greed is overturned in favor of sharing equally so that no one is hungry or hurting. A place where no one's identity or culture is erased or marginalized, but all bring the "glory" of their cultural experience to create a perfect unity within diversity. And it's all overseen by the Lamb, the symbol of Christ which is most meek, the One who gave everything in order to create peace between God and all people.

The Lamb is the reason this utopia is possible: in every human-run society striving for utopia, there will be cracks, corners of pain, places where people are abused, taken advantage of, overlooked. The only world without this pain is one where Jesus reigns. Jesus, the most human and the most divine—the only ruler for whom power does not corrupt.

Who is building the goodness in your life? Who has planted the tree of life, who has laid out the river of the water of life?

If we aim to cultivate goodness, alone or even corporately, it will be deeply flawed. It will probably serve no one but ourselves. We must remember the Lamb, whose lessons were never ones of thrones or capital gains or nest eggs or any kind of self-achievement. Jesus taught us to serve the Other. Jesus taught us to find the one person who sits alone, waiting for healing but without any real hope, and to reach out with whatever we have to aid that person. And as middle-class Americans, though we'd like to whine about the 1%, about our lack of true power, we have a lot. A lot more than most. And we are doing very little with it.

Since we're still in the Easter season, I'd like to read you Lucille Clifton's poem "easter sunday." For those unfamiliar with her work, Lucille Clifton was a Black poet of great faith and determined activism. In her lifetime, she wrote many deeply Christian poems, but they are not poems of the white church:

easter sunday  
 while I was in the middle of the night  
 I saw red stars and black stars  
 pushed out of the sky by white ones  
 and I knew as sure as jungle  
 is the father of the world  
 i must slide down like a great dipper of stars  
 and lift men up

The Jesus in Clifton's poem is one who craves a more just world. It is the Jesus who, "in the middle of the night," in the time of greatest sorrow, sees nothing of himself but rather sees clearly our deepest calling: to lift up those who are being pushed out. Indeed, for those who, like me, have the privilege of whiteness, it is to first **stop** pushing others out—and then to listen and be, as we can, the helpers, the "dipper of stars" to lift all people up.

Our passage from Revelation isn't just about the Lamb. We also get the fantastic tree, which is a tree of provision—bearing fruit in every season—and a tree of peace—healing the broken

nations of the world. How I long to sit beneath such a tree. In such a place, I would have no unmet needs, no doubts.

This side of heaven, such complete satisfaction and reconciliation feels like an insubstantial pipedream. Like a **fantasy**. But, as I said before, when fantasy is at its best, it's not simply escapism. It points back at the real world.

In many ways, we are privileged to already live under a tree of provision. I'm guessing all of us here today have our basic needs met. Many—most? all?—of us have more, even, than we need. But somehow we are still discontent.

And though we are living in comfort, we are not living in peace. We want more, and so we take from others, participating in the corporate sins of America: cheap food grown in unsustainable conditions which worsen climate change, products which are cheap for us to buy because they exploit workers, a reliance on oil which sparks war and spreads imperialism. We hoard what we have and covet more, all at the expense of the tree of life, which must, in Christ's world, cover all people, not just a privileged few. We poison the soil which is our very lifeblood.

How can we escape, though? Systemic change is hard-won and slow to come. But it is worth it: to use less, make do, do without, or share with neighbors, seems a small step, but the world is made of small people doing small things—and small goodnesses have eternal power.

Jesus' life is witness, as are the lives of other saints.

Lydia didn't have to welcome Paul and his followers—no doubt many who were baptized gave thanks and went on their merry way. **They** aren't immortalized in scripture, though, as this woman is, who insisted on giving of herself and her wealth to sustain the messengers who shared the good news of Christ's Kingdom with her.

Lucille Clifton spent her life fighting racism and sexism through little poems, little instances of beauty and hope and struggle. With her quiet insistence that a better world is possible, she strengthened the vision of a New Jerusalem.

It would be easier for God to swoop in and set all right with a commanding word. But in a compassion beyond my understanding, God has chosen to leave us with the great task of working to bring forth goodness upon the earth. We have seen the vision of a more perfect world, and we must acknowledge that, when left to our own devices, we choose selfishly. In order to bring about small holinesses in our everyday lives, we must be willing to die as Christ and be made new creatures in Spirit. This is baptism at work: that the Spirit which dwells within us guides us into hard but holy choices. If we still our selfish egos, the Spirit within us can teach us to see the unseen people who are impacted by our choices. The Spirit can teach us to seek contentment rather than consumerism. The Spirit can teach us to set the Lamb upon the throne of our souls, to enact justice and bring salvation in our lives through a reordering of priorities.

I want to remember the fantasy of New Jerusalem, the blueprint for a world free of hunger and war and prejudice. Slowly, in the tiniest of ways, let us bring about this beautiful kingdom. In

truth, I must admit that I will keep messing up. I will, at times, seek dystopias of personal gain and individual comfort rather than the utopia of Christ as servant ruler of my heart and wealth and privilege. In those moments, I am thankful beyond measure to serve a patient, forgiving God.

As Lucille Clifton wrote:

God waits for the wandering world.  
he expects us when we enter,  
late or soon.  
he will not mind my coming after hours.  
his patience is his promise.