

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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**“A Light in the City”
A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year C)
May 1, 2016
Revelation 21:10; 21:22–22:5**

Friends! Wow. How incredibly good it is to be here with you! This has been a long time coming, hasn't it?! For the last three years God has been working in all of us to bring us to this point, and I am so excited to be here with you. You are a church with a long and rich history. You are a church with a deep and abiding desire to serve God in the city—to feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the sick, lift up the marginalized, give voice to the voiceless, provide a place of inclusion and equality for all, and share the gospel message of God's welcoming and unconditional love through Christ Jesus. I have known of you and your faithful witness to the light of Christ in this city for almost twenty years. I am humbled that the Holy Spirit worked through your Pastor Nominating Committee and in my own life to bring us together in ministry here in Durham, and I pray that what we do here might be done to the glory of God and for the building up of God's Kingdom even here, even now.

We don't know each other yet, but I am looking forward to getting to know you, to hearing your stories and sharing with you in your joys and sorrows. I will tell you that you have already helped me in mine. Years ago, when I was going through a difficult time in my life, I ended up here on a summer Sunday when I was on sabbatical from my last church. In this place I felt welcomed, and the music and liturgy of the service brought me to tears on more than one occasion as I felt the power of God's presence through the scripture and song we shared on that day. Not long after, I wrote a poem about that Sunday. Maybe one day, when we get to know each other better, I will share it with you.

Our lives will become inextricably entwined from here on out, you know—just as yours have already become entwined with the lives of your other pastors—Marilyn, Sam, and Cherrie. We will walk together through the ups and downs of life—through our deepest joys and through our deepest sorrows. We will love one another. We will also disappoint one another, as lovers often do. But through all of this, we will point one another to the love that is always faithful and to the love that never ends. We will forgive one another as God has forgiven us, and we will seek to forgive ourselves in the process. We will know ourselves as the community of God’s people, redeemed, loved and sent into the often-dark world to bear the light of Christ patiently, hopefully, courageously, relentlessly.

I am incredibly grateful for the faithful witness of this congregation. I am grateful for the leadership of your strong staff, and for Marilyn and the significant role she has played during this lengthy transition. I am grateful for the lay leaders who bring their many gifts to help build up the Body of Christ and care for the community around us. I am grateful for the power of worship in liturgy and song, sound and sacrament as together we give thanks and praise to God and seek to understand anew each week who we are and whose we are.

We are the people of God. We will continue to be the church together.

I am, for the most part, a lectionary preacher. I love the arc of the liturgical year, how we live into the story of our Christian faith, beginning in Advent with hope and preparation and moving through the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Even the season we call “ordinary time” reminds us that not all of life is high or low—sometimes we find God’s grace in the ordinary experiences of our day-to-day lives. The lectionary readings invite us to dig into passages we might not seek out on our own. We are stretched and enriched by the depth and variety of these passages.

It is the lectionary which brought me to our reading for today.

The book of Revelation was written by John to a first century Christian community in crisis. John, who exiled on the island of Patmos, wrote a letter which would have been read aloud as a part of worship in order to encourage, uplift and inspire a

lost and discouraged people. These new Christians were either being persecuted for going against the mandates of Rome or they had given in to the temptation to live as a part of the culture around them, forgetting their call to be a distinct and faithful community of Christ. As a whole, the seven churches of Asia (in the area we know today as Turkey) faced a significant identity crisis, and John's letter, in large part, was an effort to help them remember who they were as the people of God.¹

Union Presbyterian Seminary President Brian Blount likens John's letter to a pregame speech given by a "great sports coach who tries to rally his team before the most important game of their season." He writes,

[The coach] wants to whip up a frenzy that will lift them to physical and emotional highs where confessing a subversive allegiance to Christ before hostile forces that promote the lordship of Rome becomes not only a possibility but also an imperative.²

Our passage for today comes at the very end of this letter which culminates in a vision of glory, comfort, inclusion and light. John describes the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, his vision for the coming Kingdom of God.



This passage [Revelation 21:10; 21:22–22:5] is loaded with theological power and promise. To begin with, John makes clear that *there is no temple in this new city*. There is no need for a temple anymore because God is in the midst of the city. Holy ground is no longer limited to the temple; rather holy ground pervades the entire city. All over the city, anywhere and everywhere, God *is* and God's people find God in every corner, in every home, in every workplace, in every garden, on every path. Everywhere they turn, the people of the city meet God.

And what is the effect of God's presence permeating the city? Light. Lots of light. All the time. Everywhere. There is no night. There is no need for candle or artificial light. Even the sun and moon and stars disappear in the radiance of God's light. "God is transcendent, unbearable, glorious Light," writes Eugene Boring.

¹ Ibid, 12.

² Brian K. Blount, *Revelation*, The New Testament Library, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 13.

“God’s presence in the city at once banishes night and all its anxieties and makes all other forms of light irrelevant.”³

There is also a universal theology to this passage. The city itself is occupied by *all* the nations. This will not be a city just for Israel, or just for the church. *All* the nations are gathered and will walk in God’s glory and bask in God’s light. This is a huge city—1500 miles cubed⁴—and it is radically inclusive. And did you hear the part about the gates? That they are wide open all day long? And of course, we already know that there is no night, so day is forever and the gates, all twelve of them—three to the north, and three to south, and three to the east and three to the west—are wide open, all the time. Imagine what a campaign speech John’s vision might have made today. The Holy City of God is not about keeping people out. It is about welcoming them in—into the light—into the presence of God—into the hope and peace and love and joy that all this entails.

And if all that wasn’t enough, a river runs through it. How can you not love this city?!

I have no doubt that John’s vision would have brought much comfort to the seven churches to which he wrote, but I would argue that John meant it for more than comfort. Remember the comparison to the coach’s inspirational pre-game speech? No coach tells her team to go on the court and passively dream of cutting down the nets without playing the game. No. A good coach inspires the team to actively do what they have been gifted and called to do. The first century Christians had been called to live as people of God, even in times of darkness and fear. They had been baptized into Christ Jesus. In his vision, John reminds them that they are people of this Holy City who in the present day are called to bear the light of Christ to the world—actively, hopefully, courageously. This passage is less about their future and more about their present. As Boring puts it, this passage contains an “implicit imperative” to the Christian community. “The gift becomes an assignment.”⁵

³ Boring, 218.

⁴ Boring, 221.

⁵ Boring, 224.

If this is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God [he writes], is finally going, then every thought, move, deed in some other direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted. [John's vision of the Holy City] does not attempt to answer speculative questions about the future; it is offered as an orientation for life in the present.⁶

If this is where we are going, then the church (we) must ask: How do our present actions live into such a radically inclusive and light-filled future?

If this is where the world is finally going, then every move we make as the Body of Christ should be made toward this heavenly Kingdom, this Holy City of Light. We at First Presbyterian, along with our brothers and sisters in Christ all around Durham and beyond, are called to be the light of Christ in our own dark and fearful city. We ourselves should model the open gates of the city with open arms in every direction, for the people of all nations, for the lost, the hungry, the thirsty, the marginalized, the lonely, the imprisoned, the sick, the persecuted, and the weary. This is a high calling. This is a holy calling. We are people of the light. Let us, in our worship and in our actions throughout the week, bear light—Christ's light—wherever we go.

How excited I am to be joining in the journey with a people who are doing just that.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

The Reverend Mindy Douglas was called as Pastor of First Presbyterian Church on February 14, 2016, and will be installed on May 22, 2016. She came to FPC after having “planted” Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. Prior to that, she served as Associate Pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, Interim Associate Pastor for Campus Ministry at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, and as the Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian in Wilson, North Carolina. Mindy has a biology degree from Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina and a Master of Divinity Degree from Union Theological Seminary (now Union-PSCE) in Richmond, Virginia. She also studied at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. Mindy lives with her husband, Tim, and son, Tyler, in southern Chapel Hill. She enjoys running, dancing, reading, singing, music, being with friends, and learning.

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⁶ Ibid, 224.