In the Bible, people always go "up" to Jerusalem. When I was in the Holy Land, I could see why this was true. Jerusalem lies on a rise, and the temple mount is yet again on the top of a hill. When I was in Jerusalem, we walked from the parking lot where we left our bus up to the temple's Western Wall. Then after praying there and leaving your written prayers in the crevices of that wall, we walked up stone stairs to the wide, flat temple mount on which stands today the Dome of the Rock, a beautiful, giant mosque. Formerly, that is where the Jewish temple stood. The Prophet Ezekiel imagined a "new Jerusalem" high on a hill, after the first temple had been destroyed on this spot. His vision had specific dimensions for a temple (Ezekiel 40). But it was much more than a blueprint for a building campaign. The "new Jerusalem" was an apocalyptic image of hope. "Apocalypse" means "unveiling" or "revealing" that which is from God. Much as the Jewish people hoped for a messiah, they also hoped for a new temple. God was to come to earth and bring "the holy city" back. This image in Revelation of a New Jerusalem comes straight from the vision in Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible.

Last week we talked about how the Book of Revelation can be understood historically as a piece of writing in opposition to the Roman Empire, and it can be understood as a spiritual vision of salvation. The vision is about God's kingdom coming to earth midst fire and warfare, with Christ at the center, as we see in Joanne's painting. The vision seems to speak to a deep place in our human consciousness. This consciousness may be both communal and personal. John of Patmos wrote his "revelation" as a letter from Christ to seven churches. The churches needed spiritual vitality in this time of social stress and disintegration. We could say the same for today: Our churches today need spiritual vitality in this time of social stress and disintegration. We need to be connected to God and to one another in this community. To much of society, the church seems irrelevant. But I believe the coming of the "city of God" could be an answer to our needs. Midst all the pressures of secular life, God comes to us—not in a desert cave or distant monastery, but in the city—even in the city of our lives today! I wonder what this says for our communal life here and now. How can this hopeful vision of the city of God coming to us motivate us to make our society more like the new heaven and the new earth God envisions? Perhaps this image will motivate us to care for our planet and work together to preserve our natural resources. Perhaps this vision will motivate us to bring healing to the crime and racism we find in our American cities. Perhaps this revelation will be the good news we will want to share with our neighbors as we tell them about our church and the vitality we find here.

We sang a powerful text in our hymn of inspiration today: "Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that hath stood too long a dream, whose laws are love, whose crown is servanthood, and where the sun that shineth is God’s grace for human good" ("O Holy City, Seen of John," United Methodist Hymnal, #726). One of my favorite hymns starts, "Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of race and clan, above the noise of selfish strife, we hear your voice, O Son of man." And it concludes, "Till all the world shall learn your love and follow where your feet have
trod, till, glorious from your heaven above, shall come the city of our God" (United Methodist Hymnal, #427). These hymns are prayers, that God’s holy city might come to earth and renew our society and our world. We pray every week, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We pray that John’s vision of a new heaven might come to earth and that we might work to realize such a vision in programs that foster economic opportunity and ecological wellbeing.

We learned this week that the refugee family that our Circuit is sponsoring is due to arrive May 9th. It is a small family: a mother and two boys, ages 9 and 12, from Yemen. We do not know their history yet. We know that they have been quite a long time in Turkey waiting to come to the United States. We will want to get to know them and help them settle in and start school and work. Catholic Charities is looking for an apartment in Oakland. Frankly, it is too expensive and too far from jobs for such a family to live here in the Tri-Valley area. The advice of Catholic Charities is to find housing and resources in Oakland where the family will be able to afford to live when they are self-supporting. This will be an opportunity for us to leave our pleasant, suburban "bubble," and help this family connect to the resources of a neighborhood and community, probably in Oakland. What an opportunity for us to connect to the city and its needs. Please see me if you can help with household furnishings, school supplies, and toiletries. We have an opportunity to be part of a new heaven and a new earth for this family.

The Book of Revelation describes a creative force, with heaven and earth coming together. The holy city comes like a bride to the lamb, the bridegroom. Their union will be a new creation. It will be all encompassing: the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. This is symbolism with a parallel in psychology that rings true for each of us as individuals. In life, we find polar opposites that we must contend with: light and darkness, good and bad, heaven and hell. We can choose how to make sense of these forces. By our decisions, we create meaning out of the chaos of our experiences. For example, when tragedy hits, we fall into darkness. But even in the worst tragedies, as we heal, we can choose to integrate the light back into our world. Even in the darkness, we can create meaning and a new reality. Imagine, for our refugee family, what coming to the United States must be like—terrifying, and yet hopeful. Many of us have had difficult life challenges and changes, perhaps not of the same magnitude as a family fleeing from Yemen for their lives, but still traumatic. Last week I heard a woman, whose son recently died, say that she wanted to start volunteer work in the community because that would give her life new meaning. This woman is allowing a positive, creative force to move her life forward. She is making choices to integrate the negative with the positive, and overcome death with new life.

Sometimes our choices need to be bold. Thornton Wilder writes about the choice between right and wrong in his play "The Skin of Our Teeth." "Oh, I’ve never forgotten for long at a time that living is struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for—whether it’s a field, or a home, or a country" (quoted in The Surprising Gospel, Robert Leslie and Wilhelm Wuellner, 127). We might all think of the times when we were on the "razor-edge of danger," and we had to decide between opposite pulls, perhaps between right and wrong. Maybe it was in completing our income taxes, or maybe it was in deciding whether to lie or tell the truth to a spouse or a boss. How thin the razor-edge is between what is right and what is wrong, what is helpful and what is harmful. We always have a choice—that’s one of the ways to look at Revelation. We have our personal battles with opposing forces. What will we choose? Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). In
Revelation, if we choose to serve the Lamb, Jesus Christ, then we find ourselves among the faithful. Then we receive blessing.

I think all people receive revelations, some more visual and dramatic than others. Alvin Ailey, a famous dance choreographer, received what he called "blood memories" that inspired a great dance work called "Revelations." It is the signature dance that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs at the end of many of its concerts. I saw this amazing modern dance a couple of weeks ago when the company came to Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley. Ailey called the revelations that came to him "blood memories" because the visions and movements that he imagined were so strong that he felt they were part of him, as much as the blood that ran through his veins. This dance explores the grief and despair of African-American people with the moaning sounds of spirituals such as "Wade in the Water" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," and it moves from these dark depths to high joys with a powerful pas de deux choreographed to "Fix Me, Jesus." The whole dance, "Revelations," has been called a "dance prayer." It is a creative movement out of despair and into hope (http://www.mercurynews.com/entertainment/ci_29704091/review-alvin-ailey-dance-theatre-masterful-berkeley-return; https://vimeo.com/17307366). Dance and music and visual art can express the emotions of spiritual imagery, such as in the Book of Revelation, perhaps better than words.

The coming of the holy city is an image that speaks to us of new hope. In John's revelation, God also gives us the vision of the tree of life and the river of life for the healing of the nations. The tree provides fruit, and the river provides water to sustain us and to allow us to grow and change. "God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4). This is an aspirational passage of transforming hope.

In Genesis in the original creation story in the beginning of the Bible, there was a river flowing out of the Garden of Eden (2:10). Later in the Bible, Ezekiel dreamed of the river flowing to the four corners of the earth (47:1-2). In Revelation, at the end of the Bible, John's vision pictures the river again, bringing healing to the nations. The river renews creation. It waters the tree of life that feeds humanity. And God is present, for the new heaven has come to earth to create a new earth. We are renewed in the image of God, blessed and showered with grace.

This shower of blessing is the kind of gift that makes us want to respond. So we say we believe in grace with responsibility. We can worship the Lamb, the Christ, and feel the awe and comfort of God's glorious and healing presence, and then we must turn to our cities and to our broken lives and set about repairing the world. Perhaps this vision is more about the here and now than it is about the end of time. Perhaps God is revealing to us each day the ways our lives can have more meaning and the ways our world can have less suffering. And once we have received the revelation, it is our job to walk forward into the light that brings us both personal peace and world peace.