

Today we prayed that God has prepared for those who loved him those things that surpass our understanding. Traditionally, one such thing has been the vision of heaven. Nonetheless, the book of Revelation gives us a picture of heaven that is wonderfully tangible and concrete, that we can wrap our minds around. It's not a vision of angels and harps — it's what we see when we walk out the doors of our homes. It's a city!

John has a vision of the arrival of the New Heaven. Like the long-awaited bride who enters the aisle in first view of her husband-to-be, the New Jerusalem emerges from the sky in beauty and splendor. This breathtaking city is miles long, wide and tall, with walls of jasper, foundations encrusted with jewels, and streets made of gold. Despite how literally or symbolically you read Revelation, we can all agree that this city is intended to blow away any concept of structure we could ever imagine. But the wonder of this city isn't in what it's made of, it's what it represents.

Of every possible image of heaven that God could send John, he chose a city. Heaven... as gritty and earthy and tangible. Heaven's reality is echoed in our grieving and longing for a world without pain. It is in our sense of satisfaction that comes only through holiness, trumping the momentary satisfaction of our sinful choices. It is in the goodness of our daily work that fulfills our

purpose.

Our time in the here and now is merely the introduction to the story, not the story itself. We are citizens of heaven in the present tense, and our lives today can be the proof of heaven as we live, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

If our lives today are proof of heaven, why do many of us live in fear? According to a Washington Times survey, forty-six percent of women are troubled by a “tremendous fear of becoming a bag lady,” even if they have good salaries, money in their purses, and decent savings and investments. And just in case you men are misguided to think that the bag lady nightmare is just about women. Well.... the truth be told, each of us can wake up in a cold sweat, terrified that we are broke, forgotten and destitute. Each of us can have our own frightening vision of being wiped out financially, robbed of stability and security, and condemned to a life on the streets. If it’s not financial fear, it very well could be another kind of fear. Fear that we’ll lose our good health, fear of catastrophe, fear of failure, fear of discovery, fear of dependency and so on. It’s a nightmare, no doubt about it. Life during the pandemic has proved this over and over again.

This is interesting stuff because our text from Acts introduces us to an apparently successful woman, Lydia who is a financially secure resident of the city of Philippi. She owns a business and a

home. She's a "dealer in purple cloth", which is significant because purple clothing is the mark of wealth and royalty in the Roman world — boasting of influence and power. Subsequently Lydia has a close connection to the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and there is very little chance that she will fall victim to the bag lady nightmare. What today's passage does describe is how Lydia responds. Based on her response, we can come to a critically important conclusion: that she is motivated by faith, not by fear.

We hear in our reading that Paul and Silas have arrived in Philippi after seeing a vision of a man of Macedonia in Troas which convinces Paul that God wants him to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to the Macedonians. On the Sabbath day, they go outside the gate of Philippi by the river, looking for a place of prayer, and they sit down with a group of women who have gathered there. They begin to talk, and one of the women listening to them is Lydia — Acts tells us that the Lord opens her heart to listen eagerly to what Paul said.

If Lydia was suffering from fear, we would expect to see her clutch her possessions tightly and run home to protect her secret stash of money. But she doesn't take any of these fear-based actions. Instead, she responds with faith, generosity and hospitality. Lydia asks for baptism for herself and her household, and then insists, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and

stay at my home". Lydia prevails upon Paul and Silas, and they follow her home. In time, Lydia's house becomes a center of Christian worship and outreach in Philippi, and Paul develops a close and loving bond with the church members there. And it all started with Lydia, a woman who chose faith over fear, and whose feast day was yesterday, May 21st.

The way to find real peace and security is choose faith over fear, and practice extraordinary hospitality instead of ordinary self-concern. We all can find a million reasons not to do something, but there is usually one reason that sticks with you as to why you should. So, what is it that God has put you here to do? Where is God at work in your life ... right here, right now? What is the one thing that you should be doing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, as you put your faith into action?

Each of us is being given an opportunity to trade a nightmare for a dream. If we follow the example of Lydia, along with countless other people of faith, we will find ourselves moving from anxiety to serenity, and from a life ruled by fear to a life shaped by faith. The particular path we follow will be different for each of us. It might mean opening our homes, as Lydia did. Or opening our wallets, or our car doors, or our calendars.

Whatever you open, the point is to practice hospitality and generosity, in line with what God is doing in your life. Only then

does the nightmare end, and the dream of discipleship begin. The question is, what is God doing in your life?

In the gospel of John, Philip says to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”. It sounds as though Philip wants to do surveillance on God to get a clear picture of what God is doing. Philip’s knowledge of scripture makes him aware that God can be “a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents,” but can also be a God who shows “steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love God and keep God’s commandments”. Jealous or loving. Punishing or praising. Philip wants to see what God is doing. Jesus responds that Philip doesn’t have to do any spying and either do we.

Noting that he has been with his disciples for years, Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”. Jesus shows his followers the clearest possible picture of what God is doing. Jesus leaves us with a deep sense of security and peace, revealing to us that the God who created heaven and earth is all about grace, truth and steadfast love.

Jesus concludes with the words, “Peace I leave with you ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid”. With God, we have nothing to fear. Jesus reveals God’s glory, “the glory

as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth". We don't have to do any surveillance on God, because Jesus freely shows the Father to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit reveals a different kind of surveillance. Jesus tells us that God reaches down to us through "the Spirit of truth", a Spirit that the world cannot see. Let's note that the word "surveillance" comes from the French **sur plus vie yee**(veiller), meaning "to watch over." This is surely what God always does through the Holy Spirit: Watching over us, teaching us everything, reminding us of what Jesus has said to us, and giving us peace which surpasses our understanding.

In God's surveillance, communication is constant between God the Father, Jesus, the Spirit and us, resulting in great works that reveal the ~~power~~^{PRESENCE} of God. Jesus promises that "if in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it". The work of God continues through us if we allow God to watch over us. Most of us want God to keep an eye on us and offer us deep peace, clear guidance and gentle reminders of the teachings of Jesus. That's the promise — that God is active in our lives through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever discovered the truth of this when you have decided to go on a family boating outing to the lake only to discover a flat tire on the boat trailer, and a couple of construction workers

from a nearby bridge project to be conveniently driving by and happy to stop and lend a hand to get you on the way again. I have. Figuring out in hindsight that if I had blown my tire anywhere else on that stretch of road, I would not have had a highway crew jiffy on the spot, complete with tools, ready to lend a hand. Was it luck or God surveilling the situation and actively working?

When we are part of God's surveillance, we don't always enjoy lives of endless happiness. We still have blowouts on the highway. And in spite of pandemics, tornadoes, and the storms of life, we can catch glimpses of God's goodness and signs of God's involvement in our daily lives. We can discover the truth and come to believe of what God said to Jacob in Genesis, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go". God promises to keep an eye on us, and to be at work in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This Advocate, according to Jesus — is a helper who will be with us forever. This help comes to us when we are tempted to go off the path. The Spirit speaks directly to our hearts, and pushes us back toward the path of God. The Spirit teaches us everything, and reminds us of all that Jesus has said. The Spirit gives us a peace that is greater than anything that the world gives, a peace that prevents our hearts from being troubled and afraid.

Such spiritual surveillance is good news when tires blow out. It offers us peace when jobs are lost, when relationships shatter,

when dreams are dashed and when illness strikes. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit guarantees that neither death nor life “nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. And so as we prayed to God to pour into our hearts his love, may we in all things and above all things obtain God’s promises which exceed all that we can ask or imagine. For it is in God’s surveillance, we have nothing to fear. AMEN.