

“Two Cities”

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest May 22, 2022

Our lectionary readings for today take us to the end of the Bible, which is fitting for us as we celebrate graduations, the close of school, and the beginning of summer next Memorial Day weekend. This is also the Season of Easter at church when we celebrate the Resurrection and give thanks to the Lord who said, “*See—I am making all things new.*”

At the close of time, as it is described in the Book of Revelation, the world as we now know it will pass away. There will be a final reckoning between good and evil, and the sea, long associated in ancient thought with the realm of the dead, will give up its inhabitants. There will be a Final Judgment, and all humanity will stand before the One who sits upon the Great White Throne. Death, Hell and the Devil will be cast into a lake of fire, and those whose names are written in the Book of Life will become citizens of the New Jerusalem, the City of God, where there are rivers of crystal and streets of gold; where grief, pain and death will be no longer with us, and all our tears wiped dry.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? That's what John envisioned, there in his little cave on the island of Patmos: the City of God coming down from above like a bride dressed up for her wedding day. Wow.

Last week, I had the privilege of visiting the nation of Tanzania, located just below the Equator in East Africa. Tanzania is a spectacularly beautiful land filled with aching contradictions. Much of it high above sea level, it is covered with beautiful forests, fields of grain and plantations of coffee and fruit. The land is rich, with mines of Tanzanite, diamonds and gold. Out west, near Lake Victoria, vast savannahs are home to some of the most magnificent creatures on earth, including lions and leopards, zebras and wildebeests, giraffes and elephants, hippopotami and crocodiles, elephants and even the elusive rhinoceros!

On one day last week, as we lurched along a dirt track in the Serengeti, I looked across a plain turned to white by a sea of zebras: thousands upon thousands as far as my eye could see! *Praise God from whom all blessings flow!* Along with the equally numerous Wildebeests, they were all on migration. They help out each other, you know: the zebras watch out for predators, and the wildebeests remember the way...

Tanzania is dotted with teeming cities and primitive villages alike. There are wealthy estates there, but most of the people are living, by American standards, in extreme poverty. The nation is ruled by one party, corruption is rampant, electricity is sketchy, and you don't ever want to drink the tap water without boiling it first—if you're lucky enough to have tap water. The police are happy to accept your money, and there is no system of healthcare for those who

cannot afford to buy insurance or pay for it upfront a result, many children are born with disabilities that go unaddressed, like club-foot, cleft-palate, spina bifida, and cerebral palsy. The fathers of these children often blame their mothers for this, and abandon the mother and child alike. Many of these children end up living on the floor of some hut, perhaps with their grandparents, as their mothers struggle to find work.

One day, we visited a family like this: two grandparents and a two-year-old living in a stick house walled with dried cow dung, its odorous interior containing dirty plastic containers, a small fire-pit and a short twin bed made out of sticks where all three of them slept at night. The mother had left for the city. In the corner was a goat, kept inside so the jackals wouldn't get it.

The reason we were visiting this family was because another grandchild named "Happiness" was a student at Faraja, a school for children with disabilities whose name means "Comfort" in Swahili, a school founded 21 years ago by the Tolmie Family, some of whom are members of this congregation. First Pres. has partnered with them and others, including the Lutheran Church in Tanzania, to support the mission of Faraja to provide education, healthcare and a loving Christian community for these children. Their motto is *"Disability does not mean inability."*

When I arrived at the Faraja School, situated in the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro, I was blown away by what I saw happening there. On the one hand, I found cinderblock buildings with cement floors housing classrooms and dormitories for about 100 children aged 5-15, all of whom were living with physical disabilities. Dressed in blue, many were using crutches, primitive walkers or wheel chairs to get around. In the dining hall, these children ate meals cooked upon wood stoves whose smoke filled the kitchen. They washed their own tin plates and did their own laundry without benefit of dishwashers or washing machines.

I had brought with me from Lake Forest a bag of small, olive-wood palm crosses: enough for each child. And as I was passing them out one by one, it suddenly came to me that not all these beautiful children had palms to receive them. Nonetheless they all politely thanked me: *"Asante Sana, Pastor."* One little girl with only one leg reached out two thin arms which ended in nubs to gently, delicately receive her palm cross—and something within me gave way. It felt like a knife piercing my heart. *"What was I thinking? Who was I, anyway? What was really going on here? Whose palm was holding these children? Who was holding me?"*

All day I had watched as these children with their teachers and house-mothers had laughed and played with each other, had sung for us, and gently cared for each other. Along the sidewalks between the buildings, I watched as children in wheel chairs were pushed by other children with hydrocephaly or cerebral palsy, all of them chattering away, their faces wreathed

in smiles. Seeing lions and leopards is all very well. They are reasons to rejoice. But seeing the beauty and grace of these disabled children was something far more than a safari. It was a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven on earth, and the joy that lies at the heart of living. It brought me to tears—but they were tears of blessing, coming, I do not doubt, straight from that river of crystal that flows by the throne of God.

St. Augustine wrote a book long ago that became a cornerstone of Western thought. It's called "*The City of God*" and it describes human history as a conflict between two cities: the Earthly City and the City of God, as it is described in the Book of Revelation. The Earthly City is dominated by selfishness and evil—and we don't need to travel to Tanzania to behold it. We can find it aplenty in our own nation—a land where there are more firearms than people, and where each day, someone somewhere is gunned down at a McDonald's or a shopping center; in the subway or in a school room; in a church, a mosque, or a synagogue.

We look out on a world disabled by deep inequities, poverty, and privation; a world where tanks are rolling across the Ukraine and famine is stalking the Sub-Saharan. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Our leaders seem unwilling or unable to find common ground.

Maybe that's why many people have lost their faith, exchanging hope for cynicism and charity for personal gain. Our churches are dwindling, and even pre-teens are losing their battles with despair. In the fight between good and evil, who seems to be winning? In the words of the *Gaudium Spes* from the Second Vatican Council it says, "*All of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness...The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings.*" To which we can only say, "*Come, Lord Jesus.*"

All last week, I was waiting to see Mt. Kilimanjaro. That mighty peak, highest in Africa, rises more than 19,000 feet above sea level. But it is often veiled by turbulent clouds, looming darkly on the edge of sight with foreboding and mystery. Yet on my very last day in Tanzania, (that achingly beautiful land of contradictions), the peak of Kilimanjaro was suddenly revealed in the clear evening light, its high summit dressed in white snow like a wedding gown. The massive summit floated above the earth on a sea of billowing clouds like an island in the sky, and yes—I did indeed think about that Holy City, the New Jerusalem, that City of God come down to us, far off, at last, far off, to all, when evil shall be conquered by good.

Do you think it makes a difference if you believe this? I do—with all my heart! Because, you see, that City is already here, and its citizens are already bringing hope out of despair, sharing

from selfishness, plenty from privation, and love—love above all else—out of loss. Is there reason to believe? Oh yes. Yes, absolutely.

Because in this world, as it will be in the world that is becoming, good is still greater than evil and death does not have the last word.

We don't actually have to "see" Mt. Kilimanjaro to believe that. We need only to look up from our lives, and take hold of that cross when it is placed into our palms, and learn to live beyond ourselves. On the Great Ascent, there are sorrows below us, but there is joy above us. How did Lord Tennyson put it? "*Come, my friends,*" he wrote in his poem *Ulysses*, "*it's not too late to seek a better world.*"