

Heaven on Earth

Rev. 21:10 – 22:5; Jn 14:23-29; Ex 24:15 – 25:22

Church of the New Covenant

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Imagine ourselves journeying through a dark and bleak land. The ground beneath our feet is nothing but stones and dust. There is no sun or moon, nor are the stars visible. What little we can see is shrouded in shadow. The landscape is featureless. In the distance there seem to be mountains, but the shapes are too indistinct to be sure.

As we walk a little further, we begin to see a faint glow among those shapes. Our pace quickens, and as we draw nearer we can see that there definitely is a light of some kind atop one of the peaks. When we reach the foot of that mountain, we find a new and mysterious energy within ourselves. We climb the footpath with the agility of a mountain goat. When we reach the top we veil our eyes with our hands because the very walls of the city shine with a glittering light.

We have reached the New Jerusalem, the holy city described by John in Revelation.

It is a city that has no need of Sun or Moon, or stars, or street lamps, or even candles. The city itself glows from within, because its light is the glory of God, its lamp is Christ. It is a beacon, a guide, a beckoning energy of welcome.

This dazzling city, whose building blocks are precious gemstones, radiates a clear light shining in all directions. It is a vision, dream of life perfected in the love of God.

That vision stands in bright contrast to the hardships endured by the suffering people to whom John is writing. It is a dream about life not just free from suffering. It is a dream that somehow, at some time, the love that God intends for all people can open to its full radiance.

It is a dream that no sensible person really expects to come true on earth.

Or do we? The ancient Israelites built an ark, a large box made of acacia wood, with long bars for carrying it among the people, and adorned with “gold, silver and bronze, crimson yarns and fine linen.” It was to be for God a sanctuary, so that God could dwell among God’s people. The “glory of the Lord” that was “like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain” would come into the ark and be among the people to guide and comfort and inspire them along their journey.

The ark of ancient Israel became a Heaven on Earth. It contained the light of God.

Jesus, when he was eating with his disciples for the last time before his death, told them that though he was leaving, his Father would send the Advocate – the Counselor and Comforter, the Holy Spirit – to be among them. And, “If you hold fast to your love for me,” he was saying, “the Father and I will come to you and make our home among you.”

This echoes what John says at the beginning of his description of the New Jerusalem, “The dwelling place of God shall be among mortals.” The sending of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is to create this dwelling place among and within us. We are to contain the light of God. We are to become Heaven on Earth.

There is a book called *Love in a Fearful Land*, by Henri Nouwen. You may know Nouwen’s name from the devotional works he has written. This book is of a different sort. It is about an American priest named Stan Rother whose call led him to Guatemala to serve among the Tzotuhíl Indians of Santiago Atitlán.

The first time Father Nouwen visited the little village of Santiago, this is what he saw:

As we entered the town, we found ourselves surrounded by many friendly men, women and children in colorful clothes. We drove slowly through the tiny streets, passed the busy marketplace, and came to the central square by a stately old colonial church. We left the [car], walked up the church steps, and marveled at the view from the porch. Around us lay the little town of Santiago; beyond its houses and huts the glistening lake was dotted with fishing boats, and beyond the lake the mountain slopes soared up, covered with forest and corn fields.

[Our host said], “Not everything is as lovely as what you see before you now. This may look like paradise, but it certainly is not paradise yet.”

Father Stan was called to serve a parish whose people live in the midst of fields “rich with corn, beans and squash and ... more avocados than you can count”. But the people share none of this wealth. Those who work in those fields do not receive enough pay to adequately feed their families. Some own small plots of land on which they try to grow a little food, most do not. Scratching out a living is an uncertain prospect every day.

Father Stan “stood with them as they learned how to read and write, sought proper nutrition and health care for their children, struggled to acquire small pieces of land to cultivate, and [worked to gradually free] themselves from the chains of poverty and oppression.” He was dedicated to caring for poor and tired people, which eventually made him a threat to the people who profited from the labor of those to whom they refuse to give a living wage, the rich who lived behind high walls, at whose behest the death squads would kidnap, kill and terrorize people who tried simply to improve their humble existence.

Helping these people in any way was considered by the government to be subversive. Father Stan came to the people as a pastor, as a shepherd. “He stayed far from politics and politicians, but he never allowed politics and politicians to interfere with his primary task: caring for his people. Without wanting or deserving it, [Father] Stan’s pastoral commitment increasingly made him an enemy of those who had power. In the context of the struggle of the poor for dignity, lending a hand to an Indian peasant becomes a political act.”

For a few years nobody bothered him. One day, a young man, the father of two little girls, was kidnapped from the steps of the church, stuffed screaming into a car, and later tortured and murdered. Father Stan and the others were powerless to help because the kidnappers would have killed them on the spot. This was certainly not the first of such kidnappings in the village, but it was the first to happen at the church. Not long afterwards, Father Stan got a phone message from a friend who worked in a government office that his name had appeared on a death list. He was no longer safe in Santiago or anywhere else in Guatemala. He was urged by friends to get out quickly, so he returned to his family in Oklahoma.

But he couldn't stay. He longed passionately to be among *his* people. He had become so close to them that they had become his true home. He said, "After working there for twelve and a half years, I feel almost like a Guatemalan and *I want to return.*"

The author said this about him, "It is important to see that Stan's willingness to give his life for his people did not mean that he wanted to be killed. There was no desire for heroism, no daredevil gestures; not even a hope for martyrdom. ... He was a prudent man who loved life and wanted to live as long as possible."

But he went back.

The killings of Indians became more and more frequent, even to the point where whole families were massacred. Then the government began going after the priests. But Father Stan refused to leave again. "[He] did not have any illusions about his own safety. What sustained him were the concrete needs of his people. He thought more about them than about himself.

One July, in the middle of the night, "three tall, slender men with masks slipped into the parish rectory. When they failed to find Stan in what they thought was his bedroom, they woke up a young man [named Francisco] sleeping in a nearby room. They told Francisco they would kill him if he refused to lead them to Stan. Shaking with fear, Francisco led them downstairs to the room with 'walls of rock' where Stan lay sleeping. Francisco called out, 'Father, they are looking for you.'

"As Francisco fled upstairs, the men entered the room and tried to kidnap Father Stan. Realizing immediately what was happening, Stan cried out, 'Kill me here!' A grim, unspoken understanding was shared among the priests ... that in the event of a kidnapping attempt it was better to be killed immediately than to be tortured, killed, and dumped by the side of the road or in a field.

"The available evidence indicates that Stan put up a tough fight against the intruders. He didn't cry for help. He knew he had no chance of surviving. His only hope was to die then and there, and avoid being taken. When his kidnappers realized they couldn't take him alive, they shot him and fled."

“Stan Rother returned to Guatemala to be faithful to his own. [He knew] that he took a great risk, but he didn’t want to leave his people alone in their struggle. As he himself said, the worst that could happen to him was to be thought of as having abandoned his people when they needed him most.”

It may seem as though the example of Father Stan is so courageous, so extreme an example of living one’s faith that it is something neither you nor I could live up to. Whether or not that is the case, I have told you this story because it is one example of the ways that the light of God’s love, that same light that illuminates the gleaming City of Heaven can shine within even the darkest of human circumstances. That light is heaven manifesting itself on earth.

Not everyone is called to be a Mother Theresa or a Martin Luther King or a Stanley Rother. However, Jesus has sent the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with each one of us. Every one of us IS called to carry that heavenly light, to be that light in the dark corners of our world. Everything we do in ministry as the Church of the New Covenant, everything we do, whether it is humble or heroic, everything we do in the name of Jesus Christ brings the heavenly radiance of God’s love into the lives of others.