

Signs of Life to the Holy City
Revelation 22:12-21
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In the new heaven and the new earth, in the New Jerusalem, there will be strange and wonderful sights to see. Scripture speaks of a river of life bright as crystal, trees with leaves that heal the nations and that produce fruit each month. There will be walls made of every gem and jewel, gates of pearls, and streets paved with gold, transparent as glass. Even though it has been described for us in the book of Revelation, can we really imagine what that place will look like? What it will feel like to be there amongst things you just don't see everyday? Painters and poets through the generations have tried to capture it, but it still remains a mystery beyond our imagination. It is also a mystery as to just who will be there. Will our names be read from the book of Life? Or will we find ourselves in the lake of fire? Such are some of the questions contemplated in Revelation. There are other questions beyond the reach of Scripture however. For example, the vision John receives of the New Jerusalem doesn't mention pets or animals specifically, but surely there will be some, right? It is a city, but surely God wouldn't leave out the animals, not even animals that have gone extinct, which is good news for those of us who hope one day to catch a glimpse of the elusive jackalope.

Ah yes, the legendary jackalope, one part jackrabbit and one part antelope, although some people will tell you they also have the tail of a pheasant. They are

found in the western United States, although rarely spotted. They are a shy animal, afraid of human hunters, and all but extinct. What, you've never seen a jackalope?



Well, here's a picture of one, a foretaste, shall we say, of the jackalopes in the New Jerusalem. Some of you may actually have mounted and photographed yourselves on this very same jackalope. It is found at a place some might call a

foretaste of the New Jerusalem, a place called Wall Drug Store in Wall, South Dakota. Now of course, South Dakota is like heaven, with the Black Hills, and Mount Rushmore, the prairies and the Badlands, and not to mention the world's largest annual motorcycle rally in the town of Sturgis, but why is Wall Drug Store like the New Jerusalem? Well, let me tell you the story of Wall Drug and see if it doesn't become clear.

It was 1931, and Ted Hustead had received his father's inheritance of \$3000, and he and his wife Dorothy decided it was time to open their own drugstore after cutting his teeth for several years working under other pharmacists. And so they began a period of discernment to see to where God was leading them. Chief among their criteria was that there would be a church to which they could walk, as they had lived previously so far away from a church that they could rarely attend. And so God led them to Wall, South Dakota, a place Dorothy's father described as "god

forsaken.” It was a town of only 280 people and they gave themselves five years to make a go of the business. Each year came and went as they scrapped by during the Great Depression in a place so far out of the way that only the Federal Government could find a use for it. You see, not too far away, work was being completed on the monument to the presidents at Mount Rushmore, and that was attracting lots of tourists. But Wall was off the main road, and traffic missed it completely. Well, the fifth year came, and a weary Dorothy went to take a nap one afternoon, but could find no rest from the noise of all the cars on the nearby highway. But as she lay awake, she had a dream, perhaps you could call it a vision, and she got up and went to her husband and the following conversation took place: “Too hot to sleep?” Ted asked. “No, it wasn't the heat that kept me awake,” Dorothy said. “It was all the cars going by on Route 16A. The jalopies just about shook the house to pieces.”

“That's too bad,” Ted said.

“No, because you know what, Ted? I think I finally saw how we can get all those travelers to come to our store.” “And how's that?” he asked.

“Well, now what is it that those travelers really want after driving across that hot prairie? They're thirsty. They want water. *Ice* cold water! Now we've got plenty of ice and water. Why don't we put up signs on the highway telling people to come here for free ice water?” And so they did, and before Ted could even get home from planting his roadside signs, there were already people lined up for their

water at their drug store. And the legend grew, and Wall Drug became known as the place to go for a free ice-cold cup of water.

These days, at Wall Drug, more than a thousand people an hour eat their lunch there. More than 2 million people a year visit. It employs more than 260 people during the offseason, and even more during the summer. It has an eighty foot Tyrannosaurus Rex by the highway to lead people in. And inside its doors, it is a world unlike any other place you can imagine, a kitschy ode to the wild west, with cowboy orchestras that play every fifteen minutes, 100% buffalo meat burgers, an old fashioned apothecary, a place to pan for gold, and yes, even a jackalope you can mount and ride. It is easily one of the world's great tourist traps, and everybody loves it. And it still serves free ice water to this day, more than 20,000 glasses every day. What began as a one-room drug store in a godforsaken place, in a part of the country sometimes described as "the geographic center of nowhere," has become a can't-miss destination for generations of weary travelers and their families. And it all started with the offer of free water, an invitation to come and enjoy a glass of ice water.

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears, say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Yes, Wall Drug is a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, because it belongs to that category of experiences that are wholly other in our lives, that can't really be compared to our day to day routine, that speak to us, that beckon us, that invite us to experience life in a new way. And if that weren't enough, it is a foretaste of the New Jerusalem because of its invitation to the thirsty to simply come and drink.

God has blessed the church with an abundant share of foretastes of the kingdom of heaven, of the New Jerusalem, and we celebrate one of those tonight, as we baptize Lucia, and as we each remember not only the waters of our own baptisms, but also the promise of the river of life and the invitation to drink the water of life as a gift. When we baptize, we remember all that God has done for God's people through the gifts of water and the spirit, and we remember all that God has done for each of us by water and the spirit. But we also look ahead to remember that God has promised life-giving water to all who wish it, to all who will take the exit off the highway of their lives to find it in the most unlikely of places, in a New Testament version of Wall, South Dakota, in a poor carpenter from the backwater of Galilee, in a church made up of illiterate peasants and fisherman, in a Fellowship of expatriates in Costa Rica, in a simple bowl from which we will pour common water to celebrate an uncommon grace, God's grace.

The book of Revelation contains some very grim images, images of god forsakenness, of violence and treachery, and evil and death. Such was the reality for the Christians living in the grip of the Roman Empire in those early days of the

church. And they probably had bad water too. And they were probably ready to give up. But God offered them this vision of something not only better than the empire, but completely new, a vision which put the empire in its proper place, and gave to the faithful a hope which has sustained us to this very day, a hope grounded in God's goodness, and God's faithfulness, and God's desire for all to experience the abundant life Jesus preached and lived. That is why the invitation is for all who are thirsty, for all who wish to take the water of life as a gift, because God loves us all, even if we don't yet love God.

Some of the Protestant traditions from which we come proclaim the sacraments to be a "sign and a seal" of God's grace in Jesus Christ. That means that when we participate in them we experience God's grace in the breaking of the bread of the pouring out of the water. These actions point to God's grace, and remind us that it is for us. They point to a reality even more concrete than the elements themselves, for truly grace is even more real than bread, wine, or water. But the bread, the wine, and the water are signs to us of God's promise of abundant life. But beyond even the water of tonight's sacrament, there are other signs around us of God's grace, and God's invitation, and those signs are each one of you. In a sense, each one of us is a living, breathing, walking, talking sacrament. Each of us is called to be a sign of God's grace not only to Lucia, but to all who are thirsty, to all who travel a dusty road. For our visitors tonight, you should know that several years ago we discerned God's vision for our church, a vision of "A World of

Travelers, Safely Home.” But how will they get there? How will they find their way? Yes, the answer is us. We will be their signs, both as a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, but also to point their way home.

In the days following our foretaste tonight of the kingdom of heaven, I want to invite you to reflect on signs, specifically the way in which you are being a sign to guide the traveler home. And to offer you a little inspiration, I want to return to the story of Wall Drug. You see, I left out an important part of the story.

Remember those signs for free ice water that attracted so many people? Well, they were patterned after a cultural phenomenon of the time, the Burma Shave Sign, a marketing technique designed in the 1920 to sell a certain brand of shaving cream you didn't need a brush to apply. A series of signs would be planted by the side of the road, each sign with just a few words that could be read easily by those in the passing cars, culminating in the name and logo of Burma Shave. So, for example, one of the most popular series of signs read something like this: Every shaver / Now can snore / Six more minutes / Than before / By using / Burma-Shave. Or: Shaving brushes / You'll soon see 'em / On the shelf / In some / Museum / Burma-Shave. Later on, the company began to use them for public safety purposes, such as the following: “Don't Pass Cars/On Curve Or Hill/If The Cops Don't Get You/Morticians Will/Burma-Shave.” Maybe we should revive that tradition here! And so, in not so quite a catchy way, Dorothy Hustead came up with the campaign that

launched it all: “Get a soda / Get a root beer / turn next corner / Just as near / To Highway 16 & 14 / Free Ice Water / Wall Drug.” And the rest is history.

It doesn't take much really. What sign will you plant, what sign will you be, of the grace we celebrate here tonight? What words and deeds will you use to help people thirsty in mind, body, and spirit find their foretaste and then their fill of the waters of life? Hopefully, it will be better than what I came up with, although even the lamest sign is better than having no sign at all: Better Than / A Jackalope / Jesus Is / Our Sign of Hope. Amen.