

I remember discovering an ornament on the Christmas tree one year that I was home from school.

I don't remember when it was, college or seminary, and I don't remember exactly what shape the ornament was either.

I don't know if it was a wreath, a stocking or a gingerbread man, not that you could really tell from looking at it.

What is most memorable about that tree ornament is that it was made by small, unskilled hands: mine, many years prior, as a small child, with a date and a tragic color scheme from the early seventies.

My name was on it somewhere, meaning that my name was still on the Christmas tree even after I had moved away, written as if in the Lamb's book of life.

I remember being touched and very thankful that Mom would keep it, ugly and misshapen as it was, for no other reason than that I had a hand in fashioning it.

I don't even remember making it, but I'm sure I didn't provide the paint or the glue or the hook or anything else, just a bit of earnest effort and an absence of artistic vision--I'm sure I took whatever materials and instructions Mom provided me and did the best I could.

And Mom saved it, not because it was anything like a treasure but because she treasured me.

Perhaps the tree of life in the middle of the holy city with the leaves for the healing of the nations will also be a Christmas tree.

If so, our mother who art in heaven will trim it with ornaments fashioned by our hands.

The startling thing about the vision of the new Jerusalem is how much humanity contributes.

*People will bring into it the glory of the nations.*

*The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.*

Like any good and loving mother, God saves our stuff.

God preserves and protects and redeems the work of our hands.

That is why the ultimate vision of paradise is not a garden but a city--our idea, not God's.

The first city in the Bible was Babel...God was against the idea.

Later on, the people of Israel wanted to be just like the other nations and have their own king, but

God knew better, knew what a nightmare of corruption and exploitation a king could be, and told them through Samuel that God was against the idea.

Yet here we are, peering over the precipice of history at a glimmering glimpse of home, and there are the kings of the earth entering a city.

They carry in the glory of humanity, misshapen and amateurish as it is, and the smile on God's face as she hangs it on the tree is enough to light up the whole city.

M. Eugene Boring writes,

*Every ditch dug, every brick laid, every vote cast, every committee decision that has contributed to the decency of human life is preserved, and built into the eternal city.*

*And yet the city is not a human achievement, rising Babel-like from the earth, culminating human efforts.*

*Without in the least minimizing human responsibility, ... (John) pictures the new Jerusalem as "coming down from heaven from God" (21:2).*

*As important as "works" are for John, participation in the heavenly city is finally a matter of grace freely given (21:6).*

That is why *the kings of the earth* are invited in the first place.

It seems contradictory, because most of history says that it is, to say that no one *who practices abomination or falsehood* will enter the city and then to admit the politicians.

It is, in fact, the same *kings of the earth* who are conquered by God earlier in Revelation precisely because of their idolatrous abominations.

Those decisions and indiscretions and acts of rebellion and cowardice are gone.

But the kings themselves are embraced, along with their glory.

The enemy is welcomed into the city through its twelve open gates with no locks, no security systems, no guards, no guns.

The city has no police station, no flashlights, no lie detectors, no litigation, no insurance companies, no need for any service or industry based on fear.

The city, in all its radical openness, is safe.

The tree produces fruit every month, so there is always food, and its leaves provide healing for the nations.

It is at once everything we hope and strive for and yet so much more than we can possibly imagine even in the most glorious of our awkward, misshapen dreams.

Yet it is decorated with our glory.

What will you carry into the city?

What will your neighbor carry?

Your enemy, your nemesis, your irritation, the ethnicity or the stereotype or the political party you cannot accept?

What glory will they carry into God's city to hang on the tree with yours?

What is your vision of the dimensions and decorations of paradise?

It's a surprisingly important question, because our vision is a window into our values.

This is what Pastor Carol Breimeier so wisely showed our church council on a recent retreat: our emerging congregational vision arises from deep, established values.

With her help, we identified and articulated those "informing values" of our faith community:

- RLC is intentionally inclusive and encouraging of broad participation in all aspects of congregational life.
- We value the uniqueness of our community as a gift to be cherished and a strength that empowers and energizes our mission and ministry.
- We value mission concerns over financial concerns.
- We value responsible stewardship of our resources.
- We seek to communicate openly...and to welcome constructive conflict as a means and a sign of healthy growth.
- In our community, people are free to ask others to participate, and people are free to say no.
- Through our social ministries, we strive for justice and peace, nurturing ongoing relationships and walking alongside one another through times of need.

Just as our own clearing vision will reflect these values, God's vision painted by John as a new Jerusalem shows what God values.

God values us.

All the dimensions of the city, a human construct, are in multiples of twelve, the number that symbolizes the people of God.

The city has fruit at all times and healing for all nations.

The city is wide open to everyone but also well lit and completely safe.

The place where God is is a place where we are all fed and healed and free from worry and harm.

It is a place where our glory is treasured and preserved.

It is a place where we are valued and celebrated.

It is a place where our name is written down and our handiwork is honored.

That is why, even though our efforts are far from perfect, we fashion what beauty and justice and goodness we can, because they will matter forever to God.

And that is also why, even though we haven't been there yet, we are sure the holy city must be home.