

Believe It's a City
Sunday, November 7, 2021
All Saints Sunday
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Revelation 21: 1-6a

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

For all the Saints.
AMEN.

Pretend it's a city. Pretend it's a city. That's the name of a recent Netflix miniseries featuring the New York City personality and celebrated wit, Fran Lebowitz.

Once known as a writer – she published books in 1978 and 1981 – Lebowitz has in the years since been better known for her famous and permanent case of writer's block and for her recurring role as Judge Janice Goldberg on television's *Law & Order* between 2001 and 2007. She also portrayed a judge in the 2013 Martin Scorsese film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Perhaps that's because opinion and judgment are her essence. Lebowitz's best role, herself, is as a kind of urban cranky person. And this is the persona that *Pretend It's a City* celebrates.

“Every single person in New York,” she tells an interviewer, “Every single person in New York used to know that when another person was coming towards you on the sidewalk, you move a little bit and they move a little bit. And this is why everyone's alive at the end of the day.

People don't do this anymore. They live in a world of one."

"Pretend it's a city" is Lebowitz's snarky rejoinder to self-absorbed cluelessness. It's what she says in passing to people walking in the middle of crowded sidewalks.

"Pretend it's a city."

To those who stop to check their phones the instant they step off an escalator. "Pretend it's a city."

To those failing to clean up after their unleashed dogs. "Pretend it's a city."

Chain smoking and sardonic, Lebowitz is every earnest and confused tourist's nightmare. And she is also the most urban personality I can name.

"You move a little bit and they move a little bit. And this is why everyone's alive at the end of the day."

This is what the city means to Lebowitz. It's a place of culture and transaction of course. Of business and art and music and restaurants and clubs. But the meaning of the city is mutuality.

A New Yorker of another era, ex patriate poet W.H. Auden, put it this way in his poem September 1, 1939: "We must love one another or die."

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."

This late autumn season of All Saints and All Souls, perhaps more than any other time of year on the Christian calendar, invites us into mystic contemplation – both of the past and of the life of the world to come.

Last week on the Feast of All Souls, we recalled and commended again to God the faithful departed – we read the necrology, the names of all of those beloved dead for whom we prayed in the preceding year.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, those women and men, both canonized and uncredited, known and unknown, who made God's love tangible in their own times and places. Saints are not typically innocuously nice or insipidly pious – some of them, I'm convinced, acted and sounded a lot like Fran Leibowitz!

But in our annual ingathering of saints and souls, we posit that present, and future are one in the mind of God. And the colors and shapes and energies we summon in building a vision of this outside of time are *urban*.

Urban. For the human community shown to us in scripture, time begins in a garden – Eden – and our final future is in this City seen by John. The life of Jesus embodies this as he moves from the rural north of Nazareth south to Jerusalem.

But let's look for a moment to the city shown to us in the Revelation to John. It's the City where all are fed. Where all tears are wiped away. Where the righteous, robed in white, move in orderly procession without walking into each other. There is no need for a church in this city, according to Revelation, because the city itself is a kind of 24 x 7 praise- and-love-fest.

In this vision, no one is living in Lebowitz's world of one. To me, that is why for so much of *Pretend It's a City* the avowedly atheist Lebowitz seems to be speaking in uproarious little tossed-off parables. "You move a little. They move a little. And everyone's alive at the end of the day."

To which Jesus would add, "And the kingdom of God is like this."

It's the "all" in All Saints and All Souls, the "all" in the revelation to John, that are the point of this day.

"Lift up you heads" says the voice of the psalm 24 this morning. Consider all who have ever lived. Consider all yet to live. And the king of glory shall come in.

And that city seen of John – or flashes thereof – will become our life in the here-and-now. This is the invitation that is at the heart of this brief season. A kind of mystic sweet communion. An invitation to take the broadest and most expansive view possible of own own lives, and all the living, and all the dead. All saints. All souls.

These days invite us out of the private and out of the personal. This is the inconvenient and sometimes challenging dimension of the mystical. Mysticism that is not merely escapism tends to impinge on the concrete stuff of our lives at every turn.

In this pledging season we are reminded that our money is mystical. Our pledges are not transactions, fees paid for pastoral or liturgical services rendered. They are instead offerings to support an outpost of God's love, and will benefit people unknown to you, unseen by you, just as we are living off of the gifts of those who have preceded us, and could not see us, but in their hearts and minds imagined us.

As we continue to work our way through COVID-19, masking is mystical. Vaccination is mystical. These are not about merely about ourselves and our private wellness, but the life of the world to come. The welfare of those unseen by us, unknown to us, but seen and known in the mind of God.

The Vision of that City seen by John undergirds our wider church's commitment as well to Creation Care, to changing our lives and our habits not only for ourselves but for the lives of those we will never know.

The Vision of that City seen by John undergirds the Episcopal Church's commitment to dismantling systemic racism. I think it's also at the heart of our own parish's

ongoing work of uncovering our past, of understanding some of our founding fortune as derived from the slavery trade, and beginning to discern what reparation might mean for us.

The Vision of that City is about all the living and all the dead.

The vision of that City informs the vows we are about to renew as we baptize two of our newest members.

Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect and restore the beauty and integrity of all creation? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? *I will, with God's help.*

Don't just pretend it's a city.

Let yourself believe it's a city.

Let yourself believe that everyone – the living, the dead, and the yet to be born – lives there.

You move a little bit and they move a little bit.

And this is why everyone's alive at the end of the age.