

October 13, 2019

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

God is in the Midst of the City, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor

Based on *Psalms 46.5, Jeremiah 29.7, and verses from the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation*

On October 13, 1860 a man with a camera climbed into the basket of a hot air balloon, sailed over Boston and, while just 2000 feet in the air, snapped a picture. The picture, taken 159 years ago today, is the oldest aerial photograph of any city on earth.

In its day, in 1860, the photo was a revelation: a God's eye view – a never-before-seen perspective – showing us cramped, and neatly laid out.

If you look carefully at the picture, you can make out the Old South Meeting House and the old Trinity Church. You can spot windows, chimneys, and skylights in bewildering numbers. You can see Washington Street slanting across the picture as a narrow cleft. You can see how Milk Street winds like the old cow-path it was. And, you can see, in particular, the clear path leading from the Meeting House up Milk Street to the Wharf ... where, on a certain December night, ships were boarded, tea dumped into the harbor, and revolution ignited.

What you can't see in the photograph is the city's social stratification in 1860: Irish immigrant vs Boston Brahmin. What you can't see is the bleakest, painful poverty set against untold wealth. What you can't see in the picture is that we are on the brink of our great Civil War. What you can't see is the roiling anguish over slavery and economic disparity playing out on the streets and in homes and churches, in courts of law and seats of power. What the picture doesn't reveal, or even hint at, are the hard, sharp divisions between Catholic and Protestant, citizen and immigrant, landowner and tenement dweller. What you can't see is the inside of Tremont Temple the night of the expulsion of abolitionists.

The Bible isn't of one mind about cities. On the one hand, cities are hothouses of prodigious sin: concentrations of paganism, violence, idolatry, corruption, oppression, materialism, and greed.

Nineveh is reviled as "a city of blood, and full of lies". Jerusalem is called "a harlot". Babylon "a home of demons and haunt for evil spirits." It is upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, that for their sin, God rains down upon them Sulphur. It was upon the cities of Bethsaida and Korozin that Jesus pronounced woe.

On the other hand, biblically speaking, cities represent microcosms of God's redemptive plan. Every city represents the possibility of redemption, of us (we humans) getting it right, of people getting along, of services for all, of the institutionalization of justice and compassion...of social, economic and government order that benefits all and privileges no one group above another.

Thus, Jonah is sent to save Nineveh, "that great city". Thus, the exiles, who find themselves in Babylon through no fault of their own, are instructed by God "to seek the welfare of the city; to

pray to the Lord for Babylon.” (Jer. 29.7) Thus, Jesus’ entire three-year ministry is a long pilgrimage toward Jerusalem (a pilgrimage that carries him through countryside and village and town...but always aimed toward Jerusalem). Thus does Jesus weep over it when he arrives; weeps as would a parent over a wayward child, a child loved and beloved, but naughty. Thus, in the Bible’s final book, its dénouement, there appears the heavenly city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven.

Here is what else the Bible recognizes about cities. Biblical cities have an outsized influence on the life of the nations in which they are situated. And, while there is no question that cities can be hothouses of sin, they are also, often, the locations of moral and ethical revolutions. Moral and ethical upheavals are ignited in cities and eventually spread to towns and villages.

Similarly, while cities can be locations of great sin, they can also be the locus of the greatest progress, where the arts and the sciences flourish, and where movements of reform and moral accountability find purchase.

We can regret the second image – the expulsion of Abolitionists from Tremont Temple in 1860 – but that painful incident was, in fact, a sign that progress was being made; progress on abolition, and it was happening in the city, this city.

Old South has always been an urban church. It is our heritage, our DNA. It is also our calling. Even in our earliest days, although Boston was no city in 1669, we planted ourselves in the midst of the densest population of the time. We have always been in the thick of things.

It begs the question. What is defining for us about being an urban church? How does our urban location, inform or work, our ministry, our mission, and our theology? What does God expect of us, of Old South Church, located as we are in the heart of Boston?

First, we are to call out the city’s sins. Call it out for rapacious materialism, greed, lack of compassion for the poorest of the poor. Call it out for unaffordable housing and faulty public transportation, for redlining and redistricting.

Second, offer ourselves a true sanctuary in the city ... a place of prayer, shelter from the weather, welcome to the stranger, a sanctuary of beauty and peace; a building devoted, not to commerce, but to God.

Third, we are to give witness to God’s good news; preach love over materialism, forgiveness over cruelty. We are called to preach into and, with our Open Door, (its hinges well oiled) bear witness to the radical gospel of diversity and inclusion.

Fourth, we are expected to pray for the city. Bathe it in prayer. Pray that the city might live up to its promise to be a haven for all.

Fifth, the church is called to individual and corporate acts of compassion within the city: addressing material needs, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner.

Sixth, we are called to ministries of political engagement, public policy advocacy, and community involvement. After all, this is a capital city, and right now, right here, we are but 1.4 miles from City Hall and just 1 mile from the Massachusetts State House. How can we not, in good conscience, but bring our discipleship to bear upon our citizenship, to speak up, act out, on behalf of the most vulnerable, including a vulnerable and fragile creation?

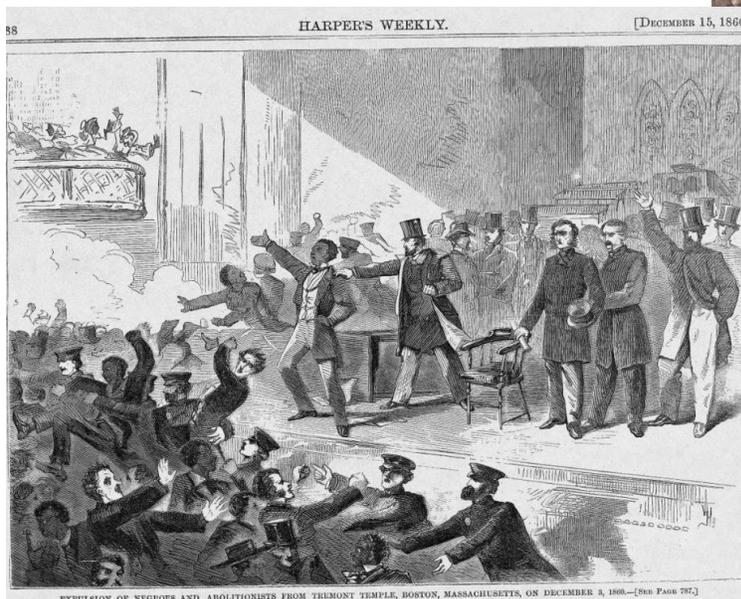
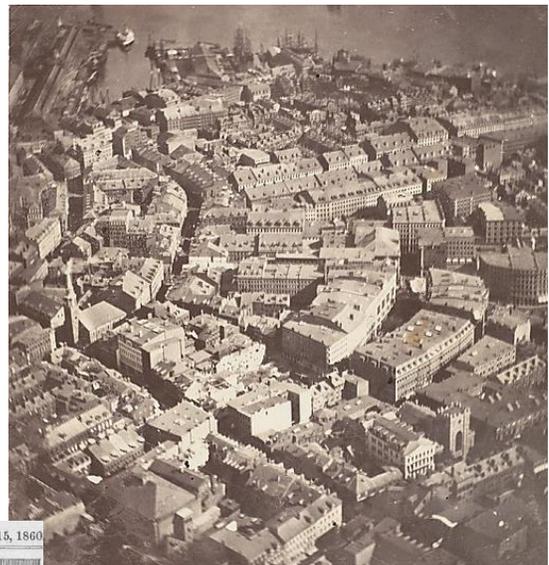
The Bible opens in a garden, but it culminates in a city. It opens onto a garden paradise, but it comes to fruition, reaches its grand crescendo, in a city, the New Jerusalem.

John, the author of the Book of Revelation, is taken to a high mountain, where he can look down upon the New Jerusalem all laid out below him. It is a view not unlike the 1860 God's-eye-view of Boston. The difference, however, is that the city John is made to see, is redeemed, gleaming. There is no violence in it, no injustice. Its gates are never shut, and there is nothing within that is shameful, deceitful, or impure.

It is toward this – the redeemed city – it is toward this, and nothing less, that the church can and must always bear witness.

This is the oldest aerial view of any city on earth. It was taken by James Wallace Black aboard a balloon over Boston on Oct 13, 1860.

Note the Old South Meeting House (left, center) and the old Trinity Church (right, near the bottom corner) which was destroyed by the Great Boston Fire of 1872.



Expulsion of Abolitionists, black and white, from Tremont Temple, Boston, MA on December 3, 1860 (right). Wood engraving by Winslow Homer