

Revelation 21: 1 - 6 Renovation or Transformation ?
May 2, 2010, Newtonbrook United Church, Rev. Allan Baker

As Christians we pray the Prayer of Jesus weekly in our worship of God. What is it that we are praying for when we pray;

“Your Kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.”

Imagine that prayer has already been answered.

The 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation says that:

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth,
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”

AND

“The home of God is among mortals”

AND

“I am making all things new.”¹

Bruce Metzger, New Testament scholar – if you are using a copy of the NRSV the chances are that the Introduction was authored by Metzger – says that the Book of Revelation is unique in that it appeals to our imagination.² He calls us to use a disciplined imagination while reading the Book of Revelation, a text that is profoundly based on the Hebrew scriptures.³

In this new Holy City that is the subject of much of the Book of Revelation, we are called to imagine that the presence of God is no longer in a special place, such as the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem. We are called to imagine that God is now “*accessible to all*”⁴. **“The home of God is among mortals”**

In our contemporary New Creed, we in the United Church of Canada affirm our belief in an omnipresent God. We say,

“We are not alone. We live in God’s world....
Who is with us in life, in death, and in life beyond death.”⁵

In the Bible, in the story of creation, life begins in a garden. Revelation is the final book of our holy scriptures and Revelation takes our imaginations into a garden city of God’s presence – a new heaven and a new earth. A place where God is present, and there is no need for a temple.⁶ The old has passed away for God has initiated a new way; a new journey for God’s children to follow – the way of Jesus. As Christians we refer to this as the Kingdom of God – what we pray for – and we know that Jesus told us that the Kingdom is among us – but not fully present!

¹ Revelation 21: verses 1, 3, 5

² Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, p. 11

³ Metzger, page 13

⁴ Metzger, page 102

⁵ *The New Creed, Voices United*, page 918

⁶ Revelation 21:22

God's world has already been transformed!

How is that transformation present in the life of our church?

Last week I referred to a discussion paper on the future of our church that had been written by the General Secretary, Nora Sanders. That paper begins with a quote from Jesus:

"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."⁷

In her paper, Nora has written about the need for transformation in the United Church of Canada – AT ALL LEVELS. She reminds us that,

*"It is not that God's church has a mission in the world,
but that the God of mission has a church in the world."*⁸

Diana Butler Bass describes Christianity as a "sacred pathway to someplace better, a journey of transforming our selves, our faith communities, and our world⁹."

Nora writes that over the next decade the face of congregational ministry will need to change and,

*"Congregations as we know them would continue to be an active and valuable option,
but not the only option.*

*Christian community can continue and flourish in many different forms."*¹⁰

Anyone who has read a history of Christianity will remember that over the past 2000 years the Christian faith has been present in many different traditions and practices.

When I attended a conference in Baltimore in 2008 one of the speakers was Rev. Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg Church. Ginghamburg is a megachurch – they have about 3,000 people attend worship on a weekend, and they project that they will top out at about 4,000 people. As a result, they have already begun to discover different ways of "doing worship / church."

Mike Slaughter told us a bit about moving beyond the usual congregational model. Ginghamburg is trying experiments with house churches; pub ministries; coffee shop ministries; a worship ministry with their food kitchen guests, and other options. They

⁷ John 24, 25 (The Message)

⁸ Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action, page 7

⁹ Diana Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us, page 11

¹⁰ Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action, page 4

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want to get beyond the model of large groups of people gathering in one place at one time each week.

Nora Sanders writes that one of the options for the future is that:

“A high priority would be given to using new technologies and social media to their full potential...”¹¹

I saw that happening recently when I conducted a funeral for a person at Northminster United. There was no notice of the death that was placed in the newspapers. The family of the deceased chose to communicate news of the death via Facebook. It is a part of the new way of doing things.

This month The United Church Observer has a story about Harcourt United in Guelph using SKYPE to connect elderly people in their congregation – and reduce social isolation.

I can see that God **is** involved in creating a new heaven and a new earth!

How is that transformation present in the life of our society?

You may have read Vicki Baier's story in The Toronto Star¹². Vicki works as a part-time cashier for one of Ontario's most profitable companies – the LCBO. In 2008 this single mother, who has been struggling for 13 years to gain full-time status with her employer, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had to schedule her chemotherapy appointments for her days off because, as a part-time employee she was not eligible for sick pay.

Imagine Vicki's surprise when she learned that casual liquor store employees in Sweden typically receive sick pay, drug benefits and a pension.

If it can be done there, why not here? Can our community be transformed to put people before profits? It would be a step towards making our society into a new heaven and a new earth, would it not?

In a few minutes we will be celebrating communion. The loaf of bread that we use is a powerful metaphor for the Kingdom of God that Jesus advocated. The loaf represents the food that is available for all of God's children – not just the spiritual food. Jesus consistently used physical objects as metaphors for God's Kingdom; the loaf of bread is one of those. When we serve communion, we are attempting to demonstrate that all of God's children are to be treated justly – justice demands that we share.

¹¹ Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action, page 13

¹² The Toronto Star, April 26, 2010

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Imagine that this loaf represents all of the wealth in Canada. In the Kingdom of God that we pray for – the new heaven and the new earth, all people in this country would have access to the wealth that they need for life. At communion, all are welcome at the table and all have bread to eat.

If this loaf were to represent the wealth in Canada, more than 2/3rds of it would go to 1/5 of Canadians. That is to say that 80 per cent of us share in 30 per cent of the wealth of Canada. Check it out with Statistics Canada¹³. That is the old world that Vicki Baier and the rest of us want to have replaced with one that puts people before profits – a world that Jesus modeled when he served 5,000 people, beginning with five loaves and two fish. As Vicki Baier knows, and we all know in our hearts, it doesn't have to be this way.

Conclusion:

Of course there are people who will become anxious about the future being unlike the present, or the past. It seems that that is the way this world has been evolving for the past few million years. As Jesus said;

“Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over.”

Bob Sitze, who has studied congregational life writes;

“Sustainability.” God’s paradoxes operate again: The more you give away, the more you receive; the less anxious you are about institutional survival, the less likely the institution will die.”¹⁴

It is a paradox: A new heaven and a new earth are already with us; God has found a home among mortals and is making all things new. The Book of Revelation is a source of hope for all who despair the state of the world.

Hymn # 713 – I See A New Heaven

¹³ **The Wealth of Canadians: An Overview of the Results of the Survey of Financial Security** 2005, published by Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/13f0026m/13f0026m2006001-eng.pdf>

¹⁴ Bob Sitze, *Not Trying Too Hard: New Basics for Sustainable Congregations*, page 172

Questions for reflection:

What we are praying for when we pray;

“Your Kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.”

Do we want the world / our church / ourselves changed just a bit, or transformed?

Imagine that prayer has already been answered The following is from the Statistics Canada document on income and wealth distribution in Canada, 2005.

The distribution of net worth

Total net worth of Canadians reached \$4.9 trillion in 2005, a 41.7% growth from 1999. Favourable economic conditions, a strong real estate market, and a rebound in the Canadian stock market contributed to this increase.

The increase in net worth was not shared equally among all families. The survey ranked family units into five groups or quintiles from lowest net worth to highest. Each represented 20%, or one-fifth, of all families.

Median net worth for all family units increased 23.2% over the period (Table 1). Family units in the top 20% of the wealth distribution had a median net worth of about \$862,900 in 2005, up 28.5% from 1999. The 20% at the low end of the net worth scale had a median value of \$1,000, a 9.1% decline from 1999.

The 20% at the low end also had a 2.4% increase in their debt load for each \$100 of assets, while the debt load for the top 20% grew at a slower pace (+1.6%). The largest increase in debt load occurred in the fourth quintile where debts per \$100 of assets grew to \$17.69, an increase of over 12% compared to 1999.

The fact that nearly 70% of total net worth was held by those in the highest quintile resulted in significant differences in average (mean) net worth relative to the median. These differences reflect the extent to which the wealth distribution is unequal. The mean was nearly 2.5 times the median net worth in 2005. (The more the average exceeds the median, the more the wealthiest family units in the country contribute to the increase in the average.)

As in 1999, the 2005 survey confirmed the relationship between income and the accumulation of wealth. Family units who reported after-tax income of \$75,000 or more in 2004 had a median net worth of \$505,700, up 15.2% from 1999 (Table 2). On the other hand, family units whose after-tax income ranged between \$20,000 and \$29,999 saw a 21.2% decline in median net worth.¹⁵

¹⁵ **The Wealth of Canadians: An Overview of the Results of the Survey of Financial Security**
2005, published by Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/13f0026m/13f0026m2006001-eng.pdf>

Renovation OR Transformation ?

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for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away"

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"I am making all things new."

Revelation 21: 1, 3, 5

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How is that transformation present in the life of our church?

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"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."¹⁶

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*"Congregations as we know them would continue to be an active and valuable option,
but not the only option.
Christian community can continue and flourish in many different forms."*

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How is that transformation present in the life of our society?

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Nearly 70 % of wealth is held by 20 % of Canadians.

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¹⁶ John 24, 25 (The Message)

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Prayers for God's Family and Creation
May 2, 2010

Eternal Mystery; Creator God, Maker of heaven and earth, we pray that your ever-listening ear will hear the prayers that are written on our hearts.

Oh God, we dream of a new heaven and a especially of a new earth;
A home in the cosmos
A home of harmony, justice and peace
Where wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Congo will cease
Where people everywhere will live with respect in creation
and oil wells and tar sands will not poison the seas, rivers, or the land.

God, we know that you have a mission in this world
And our church has a role in that mission
May we all work together to accomplish your mission,
in this congregation
In South West Presbytery, in Toronto Conference
And in the United Church of Canada.

This morning we pray for our Moderator, Mardi Tindal, and the members of the General Council Executive committee as they gather to discern the future role of the United Church of Canada

We pray that your promise of new life will surround our neighbours
And that none will live in fear, or anxiety, or worry.

Life – giving God, we pray that your healing hand will touch the lives of Jean Towle; all those who are wearing bandages and casts on their limbs, and those who see springtime beauty through a veil of tears of grief, hurt and depression.

We pray in the name of your fearless gift of newness who scandalizes the old ways and makes all things new – Jesus of the resurrection. Amen.