

Revelation 21:2-7

21Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

The story of this sanctuary and this people is a tale of biblical proportion and incarnates many of the great themes of the Christian faith. When the movie comes out, who will play the key roles? Angelina, Brad, George, Meryl, Jack, Sandra, Matt – surely it will require an ensemble cast for the story and the characters are grand. In fact, if we dare to believe, this story might even stand as a symbol for the larger church. All the **ingredients** are present.

There was Challenge

- a foundation and superstructure that could no longer support the weight of a past institution
- condemnation and rejection according to the criteria of a new time
- a period of wandering, seeking new direction
- seeking refuge in another's home but, in the end, finding no accommodation that truly fit

Then, in the face of challenge, Possibility

- the emergence and gift of leaders, paid and other,
- the formation of a vision marked by beauty and mission where once there seemed nothing but dust and rot

- sacrificial giving and extraordinary, unpredictable acts of generosity
- the transformation of a structure and of a people
- the return to a "new home"; and
- the turning outward from this new platform to be the hands and feet of God in a world whose depth of hurt grows by the hour.

The story of this sanctuary and this people is a tale of biblical proportion and brings to life many of the great themes of our faith. **Is it not amazing to witness such a thing? Is it not astounding to be part of a new creation?** One can only be proud and grateful, exuberant and humbled that such a thing is possible with *these* people in *this* place in *this* time.

We may be at an edge of something larger.

Loren Mead, one of the central founding figures of the Alban Institute, an independent resource body for the North American church believes,

We are at the front edges of the greatest transformation of the church that has occurred for 1,600 years. It is by far the greatest change that the church has ever experienced in (North) America; it may eventually make the transformation of the Reformation look like a ripple in a pond."

Or, in the words of the Revelator, "the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." And he also said, "Write it down! For these words are trustworthy and true."

Write it down! Because who dare think it possible?

I do not mean to be unkind but I'm sure that as *presbytery* and *others* in the surrounding community followed the story it was unlikely that a surge of excitement crackled through the ranks at the prospect of Oak Bay United Church rising from the dust and building upon a new foundation after 17 years. My guess was that the response was more measured, "well, why not let them try; what is there to lose?" **It is the reasonable response.**

The only asterisk to the expected **might be** the *possibility* that a death defying, world transforming God might have a different idea and that the seraphim and heavenly host, along with a score of the faithful, might to do their part. Possible But we know how things go.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... See, I am making all things new."

How *over the top* is this language! How extraordinary is this imagining of God! The list of the Revelator includes: wipe away every tear; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain no more. In other language, there will be intimacy with God, relationships that are righteous, wellness of body and spirit and the absence of evil.

What amazing possibilities emerge when God moves in, when God dwells with us! **The vision need not end there with the phrases of the Revelator.**

As witnesses to this re-newed creation, we can no longer so easily dismiss such wild imaginings with "oh well, that word is not for us!" because look at where we are compared to the pictures of where we have been. //

The key values of our time are authenticity and integrity. Little attention is given to those who do not know that of which they speak, who proclaim on the basis simply of position or status. Have you walked the talk? Do you use the product? Have you seen the results? Does the Pepsi delivery guy drink Coke?

We are called to bear witness to what we have seen and experienced and, in this place, the testimony is of the life transforming power of God even in the midst of brokenness and condemnation.

It is curious that, in recent times, we in the church speak less of brokenness. It may find traction down at Our Place and some therapists might use the phrase with respect to relationships but *we* have become more tentative, **even** when speaking about *social systems and public policy* that leave some with illness stacked in a line and increasing numbers who fall through the cracks of a system which can only be described, *generously*, as broken.

If we prove skittish about brokenness we are downright averse to speaking of condemnation. There is some irony in this in that the public image of the church is one of being judgmental, arrogant, *unwilling* to listen but very willing to condemn.

And yet, brokenness and condemnation have been **part of recent experience here**. Someone even wrote it down, made it official, put it on the wall - Condemned.

To be condemned is an outside judgment, a declaration of an ending, the establishment of a wall to any further tinkering, plastering, duct taping or painting over of the cracks. Condemned points to deeper matters, foundational transgressions, structural inadequacies. It is a radial judgment.

Since the rise of the cult of self-esteem and affirmation few use, in public, the language of condemnation; perhaps it may occasionally get fired off between *spouses or family members* in a flame thrower look or a slicing tone of voice but seldom does one hear “condemned” applied to individuals. No, that task is usually left to us to apply to ourselves. We are left to ruminate about *chances* missed, *decisions* that did not seem like a crossroads but were, *things* done or not, said or not, which we cannot take back or adequately amend and **we hammer up the order, Condemned**. Condemned by our own reckoning, much less another; oh we try to mouth brave slogans, “made my own bed” but we feel the weight of endings. And perhaps it is the reasonable response, given all the factors, **except** for *the one who holds the imagination of what might yet be*, the one who is not dependent upon our estimation of the possible.

Who will bear witness to this other way of seeing? Who will bear witness to the possibility that the certificate of condemnation does not mean the end?

In times past our people, the cloud of witnesses who lived, served and attend this place, dared to imagine impossible things: education for those not able to afford it (and so we built schools), health care for everyone (and so we built nursing stations and hospitals); respect for women, regardless of their class; respect for all, regardless of their colour, sexual orientation, cultural or religious background; and more. Are the challenges we face larger and more intractable now? Is God less able, less interested in: the poverty of millions; the spread of disease; the growth and

destructive power of a globalized drug culture; the ability of people of different religious and cultural history to live together; the gap between generations; the isolation of huge swaths of our society; *the inability of people to recognize and respond to the needs of their soul, the yearnings of their spirit?*

Perhaps, at times, in the face of all such things, despair is reasonable, discouragement understandable? And yet, to those who have seen the writ of condemnation removed, strength replace rot and beauty transform abandonment

To us is given the call and the responsibility to bear witness to a different reality: Condemned – not forever; dreams – not extinguished; beauty where once was peeling paint and bird droppings; hope, when it is not reasonable. We are now prisoners of hope.

Surely those who have seen and claimed a promise must at least hum a few bars of a different tune? When a glimpse is gained of a new heaven and a new earth, a new community, a new church, does not the spirit at least begin to sing, out loud, a little bit? When the God that we know moves and new life is experienced as fresh water upon a parched soul, surely **a song must rise** to the poor and to the rich, the young and the old, the free and the bound, for how else will hope be known, courage nurtured and honour given to the power and presence of the holy God?

As the people of God learn to sing a new song in this time, might we gain strength from this story – “well, look what is happening at Oak Bay! Who could have imagined?” Who indeed. “See, I am making all things new. Write it down!”

Surely then a song will rise, the soundtrack of a new adventure.

Thanks be to God!

Prayers of the People

Our God, we approach you with hearts singing songs of thanksgiving.

- For all those who gave of time, money and expertise so that we might worship you here, growing towards the beauty of holiness
- For the gift of this weekend, a time to celebrate a milestone in our journey, to reconnect with old acquaintances and to begin new relationships
- For all those who give of their gifts, passion and talents so that we may worship like this, so that we may rise above our own comfort levels and actually grow into your imagining of us
- For all those who have gone before us, who envisioned the union of St. Columba and Hampton Road congregations, who dared to think that this might be a base for your operations in this community and a vehicle for themselves and we who follow to live abundantly.
- For all of this and more that we do not say we give you thanks.

On this night, sitting under the light of your promises and in the presence of what you have already done **we dare to pray for great things.**

- We ask that this place will continue to become a holy place where people of all kinds - children, seniors, healthy, infirm, and all others – know they are welcome and beloved.
- We ask that the sound of laughter and songs of joy will fill this sanctuary and reach to heaven.
- We ask that, in the midst of a vibrant and serving community, these grounds may, at times, provide a place of quiet where those seeking to be attentive to your presence and path may draw close to you.
- We ask that we will be a people worthy of the opportunities with which you present us, that our first response will be “Why not?” *and* that you will *help us become more than that for which we are prone to settle* with our rationales of being too old, too tired, too privileged, too comfortable, too grumpy, too
- We ask that in this place *souls will be reconnected to the source* and so restored.
- We ask that *spirits will be lifted* to see new possibilities for their life and dreams dusted off and that we shall know we are indeed on holy ground through the music, art, dance, preaching, conversation and silence here experienced.
- We ask that our hearts may be recalibrated here, so that we care about what you care about – and nothing more, that we will share the pain you carry, that we will not forget those you do not forget, such as those in hospitals, care homes, refugee camps, crack houses and the bellies of ships that traffic people.

- And we ask that our offerings – of money, words, love, music, strategy and property – will be **excellent** and that we shall be known for the quality and imaginative daring of our ministries. **And**, we ask that ***our tools will not become our idols***.

We know it is a lot to ask. And we would not dare to put it out there except that we also know that

- You are able to do all that we ask or imagine
- You are able to do more than we can ask or imagine
- You are able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or imagine

And so we dare to pray

What is upon our hearts and

What Jesus taught us

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy Kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. for ever and ever. Amen.