

## May 15, 2022 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - A Reflection

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

“Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5)

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 148 had a vivid imagination and a beautiful view of the created order. It seems that this author believed that everything that drew breath on the planet had as a part of its life the role of praising its Creator. The words of the psalm invite praises from angels, the sun, moon, and shining stars, sea monsters, and even mountains and hills. Everything within Creation is asked to use whatever voice it has been given to declare praise to the Lord because, “his name only is exalted, his splendour is over earth and heaven.” (Ps. 148 v. 13b) If you can imagine yourself in the midst of a marvellous choir accompanied by a symphony orchestra you kind of get a picture of what the Psalmist had in mind. It is, to my mind, a wonderful view of Creation - a chorus of voices from every aspect we see - declaring the worth-ship of their Creator. [ It is with this same mind that we gather in this place to celebrate the baptism of Hailey this morning. We are in the midst of not only the joy of this family but also the joy of Creation and it sings in such a variety of ways about the Creator of us all. ] We are invited to join in the chorus as we contemplate the messages from God contained in the scripture passages we just heard. I begin by looking at the reading from the book of Revelation.

In the last few pages of the Bible we are treated to a wonderful view of the destiny of the Created world. After many chapters of disturbing images of dragons and multi-headed beasts we come to chapter 21 with the words, ***‘Then 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’*** introducing this remarkable future. For those whose life has been a struggle lately this may be very encouraging news and a motivation to ask God to speed up the time line. The ultimate climax of the story of creation and humanity’s role within that creation is seen as the New Jerusalem comes down from heavens to take its place on the newly created earth within the newly created heavens. A resurrection of sorts is to occur after Death and Hades have been thrown into the lake of fire and all those who had followed them was also thrown into that fire. The ending of the first Creation is followed by a new creation in the same way that the ending of Jesus’ earthly life was followed by a new kind of life. I find these images encouraging and quite inspiring. To know that God has this plan in mind to bring about his ultimate purpose brings me a great deal of motivation to stay attached to God so that I may share in this wondrous future.

This future will include the fact that the dwelling of God will be among us mortals. It will also include this God of ours wiping the tears from our eyes. Death will be abolished in this new heaven and on this new earth as will mourning and crying and pain. All of these things will have passed away and God will have made all things new. We are told by our spiritual ancestors that the way to be part of this beautiful future is to come into a living relationship with Jesus the Christ and be baptized - immersed - into this reality and be forever changed by the encounter. In order to live within this new heaven and new earth we cannot bring our sinful nature with us so it needs to die and the way we are told that can happen is by descending into the waters of baptism and die to sin so that we can be raised to new life. The symbolism of being immersed into water is meant to help us understand this reality - this precious gift of God - that a re-birth into a living hope can actually occur so that we need not feel trapped into this life but are promised new heavens and new earth. This astounding message is what has motivated countless generations of people to invite others to join in this journey and has motivated them to express God's love in word and deed throughout the world. Sometimes the words and actions motivated by this love can bring questions to peoples' minds about what it happening but it is all about new beginnings and joyful praise. This kind of thing happened to St. Peter.

We are told that one day Peter was resting on the roof of the house in which he was staying - it was cooler there where a breeze could be felt. A vision of a large sheet filled with all sorts of animals and birds, both clean and unclean, was presented to Peter with the instruction for him to eat what was presented. At first he refused but three times the request was presented with the assurance that God was behind this idea. After this vision a confirmation that it was a message from God was given in two ways. First some servants of a Gentile came to the door asking for him and secondly when the message about Jesus was preached to this Gentile a manifestation of the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentile family. Peter was faced with the reality that the relationship between Jews and Gentiles was undergoing a massive change. "Behold, I am making all things new". Those who had not witnessed this were at first quite critical of Peter's decision to meet with this Gentile leader but after all of the signs were explained the group of disciples rejoiced and were amazed that this spectacular offer of restoration and salvation was even being extended to the Gentiles. The death of all the animosity between Jews and Gentiles would have to die so that a new kind of relationship could be raised to its new life. Death and resurrection yet again were seen as partners which sometimes raised questions but once God's truth is allowed to be heard rejoicing results.

The Christian life is an invitation into this loving and beautiful relationship with our Creator

who wishes for everyone on the planet to have this kind of life. Jesus' death and his resurrection makes such a life possible and the primary characteristic of this work is love - self giving agape love. The new commandment which Jesus gave the disciples on the night before he was crucified was to 'love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love each other. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'. The new way of living begins, and is strengthened, by our connection to God through baptism. In the outward sign of water being poured over a child's head we declare that something unseen but very powerful is happening. The Church has tried to describe this in a variety of ways but one of my favourite images is the grafting of a branch onto a new vine. While I have never performed the action myself I have always been fascinated by the practice of grafting - particularly when it comes to apple trees. It amazes me, for instance, that you can have more than one type of fruit growing from the same tree. Apparently, there is a 40 fruit tree growing in California. ***Why plant 40 different fruit trees when you can grow one single tree that produces 40 different varieties of fruit? In California, there is a fruit tree called the 'Tree of 40 Fruits', created by Sam Van Aken. On one branch you may find a plum, on another an apricot, and another, a peach, and keep going until you count 40 different varieties of stone fruits.*** What we believe takes place in baptism is a grafting of a branch into the vine that is Jesus. The individual gifts and abilities that the person brings is further strengthened and supported by the central plant. Transmitted into this grafted branch is the love which is in the life of the vine. As the new branch allows this love to be transmitted the branch becomes even more fruit bearing and the world around it is blessed by yet another variety of fruit growing from the central vine. [It is my prayer that Hailey will experience all these things as she grows and accepts this gift from God and, I pray, that we may go forward in our journey with Jesus exhibiting this sort of love to others as we are loved by God in this way.

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