

Are We Ready for the New?
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6

Yesterday during the lakeside clean up, I was down in the woods, along the edge of the water with a handful of other UCCNBers when we came across a treasure trove of trash. I had been given one of those wonderful pickers and was finding myself joyfully able to use it to grab everything from paper to bottles quite well. My bag was filling up, because there was certainly plenty of trash at that spot to just keep moving – no need to go hunting – it was all right there for the picking. In this one spot, in the midst of all the other debris, there was a basketball and a tennis ball. Someone else had the honor of rescuing the basketball – which reminded me of Wilson from that Tom Hanks movie. But the tennis ball was mine to deal with. So I reached for it with my picker, and lo and behold, it wouldn't budge. My picker lost its grip and I had to try again. As it worked out, it wasn't that the tennis ball was slippery or hard to grab. It wasn't that it was too full of water or too heavy. The reason the ball wasn't budging was because it had roots. When I was finally able to wrestle it from the mucky ground in which it had been happily living for clearly a long, long, time, I saw that it had begun to be part of the eco-system: it had begun to be subsumed by the plant-life there, and had a root system a few inches long. When I did pull it out and dump it in my trash bag, it felt a little different than with the other pieces of trash. This was no longer just trash. It had evolved a little and was almost part of the natural habitat.

A couple of weeks ago one of our youth was telling me she had an assignment for one of her classes at school to do a cartoon that would show some aspect of how the world is

changing ecologically. As we were talking about this I started to get a few images in my head. One that I proposed was a cartoon that showed that people now lived on the garbage patch islands that have amassed in the oceans – these islands made of trash that are the size of Texas or California. I went on to propose that she could depict the continents we do actually live on now as flattened, because we've felled all the mountains to get our fossil fuel, and dry desert lands, because we've used all the fresh water to try to keep our lawns and golf-courses green. In such a world, the bad news, of course, is that life as we know it no longer exists. But there is good news in this cartoon dystopia – of sorts. The "good news" is that life continues, but humankind and whatever creatures have survived have done so by ***adapting to the new reality***. Plastic is the new ore. Fresh water is the new oil. Trash is the new earth – made up of tennis balls and plastic water bottles and every kind of non-biodegradable debris we can ever imagine. But humanity is still humanity.

So, are we ready for the new earth? When I read the text from Revelation this week, I saw that cartoon possibility – only not in cartoon form. I saw it in my mind's eye as a stark and very possible future. Where the visionary, John, says, "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." I heard him speaking quite literally. For a moment the text that I have dismissed so often as hyperbolic and too cartoonish to be given too much credence, spoke of a very real possibility: that the earth, as we know it, could pass away.

What I have learned over the years about this interesting part of our scriptural tradition is that it was intended as a harsh and specific critique of the rise of empire (Rome, at the time) and the damage done to common people when the elite and powerful rise higher and higher in privilege and position without regard for the damage they leave behind in their wake. The images in the rest of the book are specific references to the geography and political realities of that time, and the battles that ensue in this book are intended to reflect the battles that had already been fought among powers and principalities, as well as those expected to come. The fall of the Roman Empire was coming, and the writer of this story was sending a word of comfort to the people who had been oppressed by that empire. This new heaven and the new earth would be the results of that fall. And they were the hopeful word to the oppressed to hang on a little longer. God would protect and abide with them; they would be with God in the end. Indeed, this text is also probably about heaven – when Earth itself doesn't survive!

But we live in an age when the results of empire – what some have even begun to call the “harvest” of empire – are not things that will go away over time. Rather, these results have new root systems, and will not be easily discarded or undone. Ecological imbalance is one significant and undeniable result of the waste generated by rising wealth and empire – whole populations enjoying convenience after convenience! And we are seeing that other nations, which perhaps had not been as powerful in the past, are now desiring to live at the standards we Americans have known for decades, and the cost to the ecological balance is devastating. Air quality is so bad in some cities in China that the health of the people is in jeopardy. Yet, why shouldn't others be afforded the same wealth that we (as a nation) have known?

But natural ecology is not the only measure of the imbalances of rising empire. I see our national prison system, in many instances for profit businesses, for example, as evidence of grave imbalance in our country. We, the United States of America, have the largest prison population in the world and the highest proportion of citizens in prison. And, I'm sure it's not a surprise to anyone here that the ratio of people of color in prison is disproportionately high compared to the general population. And I learned this week that most of these people are not in prison because of crimes of violence (interestingly, this has actually diminished in recent decades). No, the primary reason for these incarcerations is drug use and sales. Yet, statistically, there is just as much drug use and selling of drugs in white suburban neighborhoods and on college campuses as there is in inner city and predominantly black neighborhoods... it's just that somehow the young black men are being arrested and sent to jail for these offenses more than young white men. The results of this, as we all can understand, are far reaching. This means that young black women are raising families on their own, and generations of children are growing up without men in their day-to-day lives.

I realize I have gone off on a little bit of a tangent here, and have done so in broad strokes, but I hope you will bear with me for a moment. When I tried to lift up that tennis ball yesterday, I was surprised at how strongly attached it had become. Yet, it clearly didn't belong where it was. So I had to really, really work to unearth it (literally), and remove it from that place. As much as I see that our habits of water use and oil use and fossil fuel use are creating a rooted-ness to a way of life we cannot and should not sustain, I see the incarceration of a whole generation of young men of color in our country as a similarly rooted problem – we are attached

to not really dealing with this injustice. Undoing these parts of the ways we have become a comfortable people is going to take some hard and devoted work. It's going to mean being willing to be challenged and changed.

In the text from the book of Acts, we hear the story of when Peter first began to welcome gentiles into the church. This bothered the "apostles and believers who were in Judea." Peter had broken more than bread with these foreigners – had eaten foods that were deemed impure under Jewish purity laws, and the other apostles were bothered by this. But as Peter shares HIS vision – this image of a cloth with all kinds of animals on it – a vision that came to him while he was praying and in a trance – he is very clear that he understands it to mean that he is called to welcome all people into the faith. He shares these words that came to him as God's words: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." He goes on to say that the spirit told him to "not make distinction between them and us."

What is remarkable in this story is that Peter clearly isn't totally sure about the HOW of what he is called to do... he doesn't articulate a plan, per se. But he is clear that he is called to move forward with the knowledge that it's not up to him to decide whom God will change, but only to keep opening his mind and heart to understanding himself and his calling in new ways, and to moving forward and making it possible for people to know God. As he does this, he discovers that the Spirit of God can work through him, even without his intention and control.

So I'm worried about the roots that are forming on our ways of life. I'm worried about the fact that we are all so comfortable in our sameness and conveniences. I'm worried about a country in which we can get new laws passed in a week if our travel

schedules are a little thrown off, but we can't even BEGIN to reform laws where thousands die daily because of access to guns. I'm worried about the roots forming on our comfort and ease; and whether we will be able to let go of these in order to save our planet from becoming new in ways we really might not enjoy; and I'm worried that even this is all about us rather than the planet and the others on this planet and future generations! I'm worried about our rootedness to not having to deal with differences and the potential anger of a whole segment of our society because we have managed to imprison such a large proportion of the African American society. I'm worried about our rootedness to all of these things and more. And I don't have a clue HOW we are really going to get to a new reality.

But I feel the hand of God pulling at us. Like the pickers we were using yesterday to reach into the muck and branches to grab the things that shouldn't be there... I think God is reaching into the muck of our lives and trying to dislodge us from the comforts we are enjoying, and is asking us – like God asked Peter and John – **to follow a vision of new possibilities!** We may not know exactly what the end results will look like – but like Peter, I think we are being called to hear these words again: **What God has made clean, you must not call profane,** and to cast and hold a vision of a different world! For Peter, the "clean" thing may have been food – but for us it is the natural world... it is our differences... it is our ability to trust one another. God is asking us, like God asked Peter, not to make distinctions between them and us! The thing I hope we can pay attention to is that this isn't the end result – it's the means to new life!

In our worship today we lifted up the wonderful Psalm 148 in which all of creation is called to give God praise! It is fitting, as we

continue to move through our Mission 4/1 Earth time to keep this focus on creation. But I hope we can never forget that these issues are inextricably connected to the issues of poverty and racism and violence that are characteristic of our time and that are the other “harvests” of living in a world in which privilege abounds for a few as empire continues.

Yesterday, as I was walking back to the church from my participation in the efforts to clean up the woods and lakeside, I passed two women neatly dressed in exercise clothes, who were out for their walk. One of them stopped me and said, “Did you all do this? It looks amazing. Did you all do this? I passed here yesterday and I was noticing how awful it looked. It looks so much better. Thank you!” I told her that indeed, we had done this. And then I went on to say, “It’s a combined group from the church and the Pike Lake Trail neighborhood, and if you’d like to participate next year, I could take your name.” She looked at me with this blank face, as though I was speaking a foreign language. I had assumed that since she had walked the same trail two days in a row, she perhaps lived in the area, and since she had noticed the trash the day before she might feel a call to be part of the solution. She did not give me her name and contact information.

But, here was a woman praising! She was praising work others had done, and in effect, she was creation being given a chance to praise. This morning when I opened my door to come to work, I was met by a veritable symphony of bird songs- praise being lifted up by the natural world. And in all our reveling in the sunshine and warmth, even we are given a chance to praise this weekend.

But I hope we can also remember that we are called, as part of that praise, to be willing

to be uprooted a little (no, honestly, in the end we’re going to need to be willing to be uprooted a LOT!) – to move out of our comfort and our worship of convenience and **to share in the work** of bringing more people and more of creation to the place of true deep broad wonderful praise! Because the new heaven and the new earth are not supposed to be **dystopian plastic islands**, but are supposed to be where tears are wiped away! Where there is no more death, no more crying and mourning, and where the first things have passed away.

The good news is that those first things can be our **naiveté and inability to see and understand our call** – and the **new things** can be our sharing with Peter the call to know all people as children of God... and to celebrate the inherent **goodness and cleanness with which God has created all things and all people...** and to just take the next steps we know to take, whatever they might be, and then to trust that the holy spirit will work through and with us, to bring about new life and healing where it is most needed – even if that might be to our own hearts and minds.

Let’s get ready for the new heaven and the new earth by feeling the tug of God on us to let go of some of the ways we are rooted in our wastefulness, our racism, our worship of convenience, and our comfort and ease. And let’s find ways to help one another give praise to God for all the blessings we know and can share as children of God, together. Let’s hold a vision, like Peter, and like John... and faithfully move toward it together, with God as our guide each step of the way. Amen.