

Sermon: May 19, 2019 – Revelation 21: 1-6 and John 13: 31-35
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

This morning we have heard two readings, both speaking of something NEW: the new commandment of love that Jesus gives his disciples in the gospel of John, and the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, in the book of Revelation.

Occasionally in our lives, things emerge that are brand-new. A new learning or a new opportunity comes out of nowhere and transforms the path we are on, or, conversely, something new and negative that basically came from nowhere will assert itself in unwanted ways. There are many times, however, that the new developments in our lives or in the life of the world aren't so much NEW, as newly visible, newly noticed, or newly influential.

The world of scientific/medical advancement and the development of common household products are littered with stories of people "discovering" something that had been present for a long time, they simply started looking at it in a new way. Often, that which we take as new, may be something that has been there all along; what is NEW is that we finally RECOGNIZED it. I think of the number of times I've heard people who have taken up a second career, which from the outside looks completely new yet may well be the re-emergence of something they loved doing when they were much younger but never imagined doing as a career. Or the stories of couples who did not fall in love at first sight, but gradually had it dawn on them that the love of their life was right there in front of them. The NEW things that God does in our midst may well be brand new to us but often they aren't new at all; what IS new, is our recognition and uptake.

For three years, Jesus travelled with his disciples, mostly town to town around the Sea of Galilee, living together, learning together, embodying God's healing, reconciling love. Then, after their mission transitioned to Jerusalem, Jesus says to them "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 34-35)

To an extent, I wonder why Jesus calls this a new commandment, when it sounds to me like what they had been doing all along. In Mark's and Matthew's recollections (Mk 12: 28-34, Mt 22:35-40), Jesus had already defined loving God with all of one's heart and soul and mind and strength, and loving one's neighbour as oneself, as being the commandments that stand above the others... so what would this add? Maybe it's just the difference between the gospel accounts, but Preacher and Greek scholar Mark Davis helps me out in my wonderings, writing:

"Just before [this text] is the whole exchange between Jesus and Judas, when the two of them are the only ones who know that Judas' betrayal is at hand. Following this text is when Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times. The astounding fact is that the whole language of loving one another as disciples is wedged between these two encounters of betrayal and denial. Lifting verses 31-35 out of the context of betrayal and denial seems to make it just a morality piece, an injunction to love with sweet feelings and kind sentiments. Keeping these verses in this context makes it a call to a radical kind of love."

These words from Jesus to his disciples, then and now, come with a sense of urgency, and reminds us that the love we are to share with the world, is a love strong enough to withstand the hardest and most heartbreaking scenes of our lives. It is also, very clearly a love that is birthed and supported within community. It is possible to love God all on my own, and to love my neighbour all on my own, but here Jesus calls his followers to go beyond solitary actions, and

embrace the love he has exhibited for them within their circle of trust and support and advocacy. Their commitment to his way of love for newcomers and strangers and outsiders in the community beyond them, would grow out of a circle of gracious, sacrificial love.

To an extent, what's "new" about Jesus' command to love is its setting, not the love itself. The love has been at the heart of God from eternity, but the importance of supporting one another RIGHT NOW, the urgency, is new. In the moment between being betrayed by Judas and abandoned by Peter, Jesus helps the group to understand how vehemently the powers of the world oppose the life-giving power of love; and because that opposition is so vehement, they must trust that love more than ever before. Because of what was happening in the NOW, their commitment to his love needed to be fresh, amplified, NEW.

The other scripture this morning, comes from a book that I keep wanting to understand better than I do: the book of Revelation. We're nearly at the end of this dramatic, unusual, visionary book when we encounter the reading we heard this morning, which uses the word "new" no fewer than four times and describes a whole new order:

"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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he 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.'

And 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.' Then 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.'"

Part of what makes the book of Revelation so challenging, is the amount of worry that gets engendered by its end-times vision of tumult culminating with this birthing of a brand new world. Yet virtually every commentator on Revelation that I came across this week emphasizes not this far-off, far-out scariness, but the sense that the book of Revelation was written to bring specific, timely encouragement to stressed-out Churches in its day, showing them in a very visual way that God's intention for newness and renewal was something they could hold on to even now.

Jonathan Evans, a Vancouver pastor, is one such voice and he writes:

"This book has been used to justify countless end-times countdowns, create wild theories about the meaning of its symbols (no, it's not about helicopters), and sell many 'apocalyptic' movies and books. All of these tend to miss the point of Revelation, and lead us down paths that, while interesting, even entertaining, do not bring us any closer to the main object and subject of the book, Jesus Christ.... Revelation is a *prophetic* book, not because it tells of the future...but because it is the word of God spoken directly into the world. [It] is meant to be read as Christ's word to the immediate Church in a concrete world; these are not flights of fancy, or timeless symbolic images, but the word of the Lord meant to impact the real-world situations of the Churches it was written to, and to be understood by all those 'who have ears to hear.'"

I'm still adjusting to that notion, of Revelation being concrete and present-tense rather than ethereal and end-times and spooky, but am willing to give it a go. So with that in mind, imagine these words speaking of something that God is already bringing about in the lives of those under great threat. This holy intention of God, in the here and now, has these features:

- All sense of separation from God evaporates, as God dwells with us.
- Death, put in its proper place when Jesus rose above it, no longer holds us hostage.
- Our pain and our losses are held in love, God's own comfort wipes away our tears.
- The things we allow to define our lives and our days, our self-selected Alpha and Omega, are replaced by an acknowledgement that God is at the beginning of our days and the end of our days, so how could everything in between not also be bathed in love?
- And: in a world where God's always-has-been intention breaks into the present, the thirsty will have all the water they need, without price. Imagine what the world we live in would be like, if healthy water was the birthright of all people, rather than a commodity.

If we take this reading in the same way as the reading from John 13, as describing something that is "new" in that it takes the Divine intention for all creation, which has always been there, and lifts it into our "now"... well, just imagine how empowering that can be! Because, for all the division and strife and hopelessness and instability that the world engenders in us, this vision of God's engagement with us says that none of the hate-filled chaos that has so much sway in this world is God's intent. Never has been, never will be. God, the infinite and eternal power of love on which our existence rests, calls us to set OUR intentions on a world where all enjoy the holy gift of Shalom: peace, health, wholeness & abundance for ALL. This agenda is anything but NEW, but our willingness to let it capture our imaginations, can be.

From these two scriptures, then, I pray for a spirit of "newness" or "renewal" to be real for each of you, for all of us together as a congregation, and for all in this world who live under threat. Whether you are doing the hard work of changing something in your life, or struggling to accept yourself as beloved in God's sight, know that LOVE is the ground of each person's being. And as we seek God's wisdom in reaching out to the present and future spiritual needs of the people of the Bow Valley, as Christians across the northern hemisphere struggle to learn how to speak love and hear love and be love in a context that is so much more diverse than it was a generation ago, may we together know that LOVE is what defines us as disciples. In our prayers for ethnic and religious minorities, as we join in the cause in favour of women's rights and safety for people of all sexual orientations and expressions, may we and they know that LOVE is God's intention, always and for everyone. It's ancient, it's newly emerging, it's infinite and eternal; it is LOVE, ready and willing to be embodied in our personal lives, and our together life, and in the life of the world.

For Jesus said to them, then, and to us today and in all our tomorrows: "love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." May this be so, Amen.

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