

“All Things New” – Rev 21:1-6a

There was an interesting article in the Vancouver Sun yesterday, relating that the Auditor General gives our province a failing grade for not being prepared enough for the inevitable “big one” – major earthquake – that is coming. Now nobody can predict when it will happen, but it seems that these major (force 9) quakes come with surprising regularity about every 500 years. Apparently we’re coming due, and the evidence can be seen by the fact that Vancouver Island is both rising higher and tilting down on the seaward side.

Part of the reason that we aren’t prepared here is that people generally ignore how dynamic the earth actually is. We tend to think of the earth as unchanging – “solid as a rock” is one expression used that is based on this belief; however a geologist will tell you that rock is either plastic (i.e. bendable) or brittle (i.e. shatters easily). Good china on fancy tables is made from “rotten granite” much of which was mined in Cornwall.

This same belief that the world doesn’t change in our lifetime slops over into other areas as well – into economics and politics and even personal relations for example. We believe that our countries will continue to exist forever into the future, our incomes will be secure, our lives will continue on as at present.

However, the evidence is clear that everything around us, and indeed everything within us, is changing constantly. The temperature of the planet oscillates from ice age to hot spell to ice age to hot spell ... The continents themselves drift around on the surface of the planet, forming and reforming as they split and collide. Our political systems rise and fall, empires and kingdoms come and go, and good and evil triumph alternatively. Our family and friend relationships run hot and cold, ebb and flow. As we age both our bodies and our minds change, reacting to pressures and environmental factors and people around us. It can all be quite disturbing, even discouraging, especially since we not only constantly seek some kind of stability and predictability but even delude ourselves into thinking we have found it for the long run.

And so I thought today’s reading from Revelation would be useful as it brings us a message of promise of change with a foundation of hope underlying. However, in preaching on the book of Revelation I run smack into a problematic issue – problematic for many of you although not so troubling for me. You see I have a slightly – well, perhaps radically – different view of the Revelation of John than most people do. Many if not most people believe that this book is a ‘pure’ vision; i.e. the recording of what John actually saw, and that the events described in it have either happened or will happen exactly as described. As a result most people find the book frightening to say the least, offering predictions of doom and disaster happening in various nasty and gory ways, portending “The END.”

However when you begin to examine the structure of the writing in the book another way of hearing it becomes not only possible but to me much more meaningful – so much so that I often refer to the book as the “Fifth Gospel” because I see and hear it as the story of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, albeit it presented in what can best be described as in Superhero Comic Book style. If you’re not familiar with that genre these illustrated pieces of literature have highly exaggerated colours and notations for dramatic effect, to help convey their message. To try to analyze why the sky is purple in one cell of the comic and greenish in the next most often proves to be a futile exercise – it was done that way simply for dramatic effect. The book of Revelation is similar in that it uses word pictures for dramatic effect, and trying to resolve the specific images into meaningful objects can lead one down some pretty twisted and unfruitful canyons.

So how then can we make sense of all that’s happening in there, and come away with a message that is consistent with the grace of God that we hear in the rest of the New Testament?

The answer to that lies in examining the structure of the book and when we do that a new understanding begins to come clear – an understanding of the incredible grace of God in Christ. When this book of the bible is mentioned most people will remember only fragments, and usually the more dramatic parts like the “four horsemen of the apocalypse.” Some will remember something about plagues and bowels and scrolls and angels and horrifying creatures and perhaps even a lake of fire. But few recognize that there is a highly-conscious and very deliberate ordering of the events that appear in the “vision.”

We are introduced to the number seven early in the book, helping us to remember that the number seven was understood to be the number of completeness, a holy number: seven churches, seven golden lampstands, seven stars, seven spirits of God (does that not raise your curiosity?), and seven flaming torches. All of these sevens are laid before us before we get to the real meat of the vision – the seven scrolls, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls.

In each of these three major components there is a similar structure as each of the seven elements are activated: for each of the first three elements some bad stuff happens; after the fourth element much more bad stuff happens and we begin to appreciate the escalation and begin to dread the final outcome. After the fifth element even more bad stuff happens to humanity, and we begin to fear that the seventh will herald the end of all things. The sixth element is invoked, and from the resulting devastation we are now totally convinced of and ready for the complete and utter destruction of the earth and all humanity upon the activation of the seventh, since it is the one that will complete the events.

And this is where the upside-down, not-as-we-would-write-it grace of God begins to shine through, for just as we are certain (each time!) that this is truly the end, the result of the seventh element is a complete and utter surprise. When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!"

There is of course more spectacular and colourful stuff that happens, bringing us to our reading for today – the climax of the book and of the revelation: And 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; 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." This is the key and foundational message of the entire book! This is the same message as the four Gospels (albeit cast in a totally different style) ... God will dwell among his people, and we can look forward to a new and better life, a life free of the uncertainties and trials and troubles that are part of our current existence. This is exactly the same message as we hear from Jesus in another book, “and lo I am with you to the end of the ages.”

“I am making all things new.” What a powerful and powerfully assuring message from God in Christ. And indeed that is a prophecy already being fulfilled. In Christ God is truly making all things new. No longer is the only path to God an almost impossible-to-accomplish trek through a minefield of rules and regulations, with the balancing of curses and blessings defining whether one can even consider being allowed into the presence of God. In its place is a welcoming and accepting route of reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus as the Christ. With Christ’s birth, and life, and death and resurrection all things are being made new. The path to reconciliation with God has become one of loving acceptance and forgiveness of sins. The

value of hard-fought and hard-won piety is replaced by the value of compassion and love of justice and mercy. The impossible system of complex and even contradictory laws and rules is transformed into a simple but passionate commandment: love God with all you are and love others as you are loved.

We ourselves are part of the “new” that God is creating. In our faith we too are changed, altered for the better. As we respond to Christ’s call to love one another in deeds of mercy, justice, aid, and companionship we grow into the kind of people God wants us to be. Hearts and minds and doors are opened as we become new people and it is a joyous thing indeed.

Here we stand, on the brink of a new year, a year that offers to bring a flood of new things – new places to worship, new challenges of relocation, new experiences by the truckload. The prospect of so much new can be frightening, but the message of reassurance from God echoes throughout the scriptures – including the book of Revelation. God promises us that all will be new, and Christ promises that he will be with us through it all, and the Holy Spirit who uplifts and guides us is the living proof of that promise, and we are comforted. Happy New Year, indeed!