

Just Living
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Nov. 14, 2021

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-4; Luke 4:16-30

Hymns: New Earth, Heavens New – VT 377, Move in Our Midst – VT 827

Revelation 21:1-4 (The Message)

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new.”

Luke 4:16-30 (The Message)

He came to Nazareth where he had been raised. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God’s Spirit is on me;

he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, “This is God’s time to shine!”

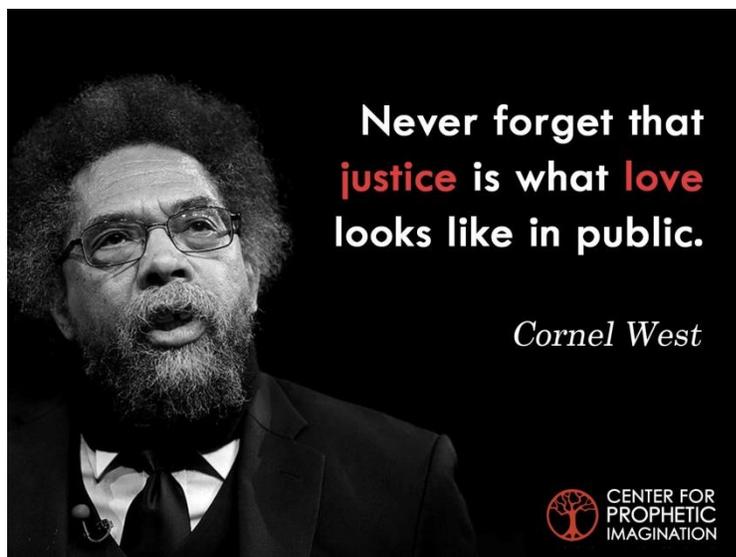
He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.” All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one we’ve known since he was just a kid?” He answered, “I suppose you’re going to quote the proverb, ‘Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.’ Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown. Isn’t it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land, but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Sarepta in Sidon? And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian.” That set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger. They threw him out, banishing him from the village, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom, but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

We have spent the Fall on the worship theme of justice and just living, exploring everything from just race to just money, from just power to just sexuality, and how to live justly and innovatively during a global pandemic. These themes have been full of challenge. Justice may seem like a big ask these days, when the upheaval of the pandemic continues to demand so much of our attention and energy. And yet as far back as the prophet Micah (and long before!), we know that part of being faithful is a calling to be people of God's justice, people who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

John van de Laar puts it this way in our worship resource:

Imagine for a moment what your perfect world, the world you would most love to live in, would look like. Most of us would probably describe something not unlike the vision of Revelation 21—a world where earth is made new, free of all the scars of development, war, and human carelessness; where the heavens are glorious and clean, free of pollution and acid rain; where we are all connected with the divine life, and where suffering and grief are gone. We all long for a world of peace, justice, and connection.

How different it would be to live in such a world! We would all feel safe and secure, we would all know our place in the world and feel affirmed, accepted, and valued. We would all have everything we need to live our best, most authentic, and most vibrant life. This may feel like an impossible dream, and perhaps it is. But it's still worth striving for isn't it?¹



I was reminded throughout this series of the words of Union Theological Seminary professor Cornel West, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” Justice is ultimately about how we show love to God and to

¹ John van de Laar, “Just Living: A Liturgical Guide to Everyday Justice,” (Boksburg, South Africa: Sacredise Publishing/sacredise.com, 2021), 31.

our neighbours, which are so very often the same thing.

Our passage from Revelation 21 is a familiar one, but I've had it read today in what is perhaps a new translation for us – Eugene Peterson's contemporary paraphrase, *The Message*. Perhaps this has allowed us to hear the text in a new way – as a celebration of renewal, of God making heaven and earth new. How does God do this? "Look! Look! God has moved into the neighbourhood," it says. "Look! I'm making everything new." Sounding a bit like my kids when they want me to watch them do a new dance move ("Look, Mummy, look!"), this God tries to get us to pay attention. God is doing something new – bringing about the justice that we have been longing for.

Now there are a few things to notice here. Notice, first, that this is not about us all being whisked away to heaven, to some spiritual realm where the material is no more. There is renewal of both heaven and earth. This means that the injustices suffered by creation will also be healed by God. There is a just earth, too. Taken all together, these various worship themes give us a wonderfully multi-faceted and layered understanding of justice. Like a tangled string, we come to see that justice in one of these areas is inseparably tied to justice in another: we cannot have a just earth without tending to just race and the ongoing wounds of colonialism and domination; we cannot have just race without just economics, redistributing so that all have enough; we cannot have just economics without just sexuality, making sure people of all genders can work and love in peace; we cannot live justly without empowering one another, the way trees do not compete for light but share with one another, even show compassion toward one

another² within the justice of creation. These tangled threads cannot be unravelled. God is weaving them all together into something new.

But newness is not always welcomed, especially when it comes to faith. I think we tend to assume that faith is all about preserving ancient wisdom, about handing on historical traditions – “give me that old time religion,” as the song goes. And Jesus found out the hard way that there are real consequences to questioning that! In Luke 4, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth to worship at the synagogue. It seems he’s even up to preach. He stands up to read Scripture and chooses this passage to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

God’s Spirit is on me;
[God]’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, “This is God’s time to shine!” (The Message)

The reading (actually a combination of verses in Isaiah 58 and 61) references the Jubilee, that tradition of well, justice, that is outlined in detail in Leviticus 25, involving “the redistribution of real estate, the cancellation of debts, the freeing of slaves, and the designation of an agricultural fallow year.”³ In God’s jubilee justice, there is truly liberation for all – even the land is given its rest. We’re told that Jesus read this, then “rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, ‘You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.’ All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son, the one

² Suzanne Simard interviewed by Matt Galloway on *The Current*, CBC Radio, Nov. 2, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63-the-current/clip/15875890-suzanne-simard-secret-societies-trees> See also Simard’s book, *Finding the Mother Tree*.

³ Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 16.

we've known since he was just a kid?" (Luke 4, The Message). At first, the people have a kind of hometown pride about Jesus – isn't this the kid who grew up here? Little Jesus? And look how well he preaches now! And they seem to find his choice of Scripture unremarkable. Maybe those were familiar, even comforting words about the coming Jubilee.

But when Jesus preaches – when he sits down and gives his interpretation of the text – the congregation's reaction shifts dramatically. His words "set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger." The NRSV says they were "filled with rage," to the point of violence. They kick Jesus out of their synagogue and almost throw him off a cliff, in what is perhaps the most violent reaction Jesus receives in the Gospels⁴ apart from his arrest and crucifixion. So what has he said to provoke this extreme reaction? Well, he has critiqued something at the centre of Israelite faith: the sense of being God's chosen people. Jesus talks about times when the prophets Elijah and Elisha ministered outside of Israel, implying that salvation – God's jubilee justice – is not for the Israelites alone. This clearly strikes a nerve, questioning, as Bible scholar Sharon Ringe puts it, the assumption that "the Jubilee images found in the text from Isaiah were ... blessings promised particularly to Israel." Jesus "challenged that assumption of privilege," making "the text of promise ... into a threat: the poor to whom the good news would come and the captives who would be set free might be any of God's children."⁵ Jesus was doing something new, reinterpreting an age-old assumption about who was included in "God's favour." And the congregation reacts with fear and rage.

⁴ Ringe, 40-41.

⁵ Ringe, 44.

We like to think we know better than that hostile congregation that drove Jesus out – possibly even mid-sermon! – to the cliff. But if you think back, has there been a time when you have responded with fear or anger to something that challenged a deeply-held belief? We can all probably think of an example. And maybe you're in the thick of this right now, as the experience of the pandemic has itself been a challenge to some of our theology, perhaps some of our ideas about where God is when we are struggling. These faith shifts are understandably hard, as we feel like foundations we thought were firm are shifting, even crumbling. A few authors I know talk about this as the "deconstruction" of their faith. In light of new experiences or new insights about God's work in the world, they have had to deconstruct some of what they've been taught and reconstruct something new. Their faith has grown, but when one is in the midst of it, it's amazing how similar growth and being lost can feel. There are growing pains to these evolutions of our faith over our lifetimes.

One example that came to my mind is linked to Remembrance Day, which just happened a few days ago. Our household had several conversations about this day, especially around what my children were learning in school and our Mennonite peace theology. In Kris's and my families, we have grandfathers and great uncles who were Conscientious Objectors to World War II, believing that Mennonite peace theology mainly meant our young men opting out of military service. But I also have great uncles who enlisted (in fact, these were the brothers to the CO), many out of a sense of responsibility to the wider community beyond the Mennonite world. As painful as some of those divides were at the time, I believe it has led us to some helpful changes in our Mennonite peace theology over the past several generations. We now have a much

more complex sense of what makes for peace than simply our own community being excused from military service, one that incorporates more of a sense of responsibility for our neighbours. Instead, we have new fields like peacebuilding and restorative justice.



To me, peace now means taking on precisely what we have been talking about: justice in these many areas, which you can see on this peace wheel.⁶ When I wear my little “To remember is to work for peace” button from MCC alongside a white peace poppy, this is what I am envisioning: working for a just peace for creation, education and healthcare, sexuality and relationships, economics, and our faith and interfaith and interracial and

neighbourly communities. In all of these, God declares: “Look! I’m making everything new.”

But maybe it’s overwhelming to think of all of these types of peace and justice. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber recognizes that right now, we might be in a state of overloaded “emotional circuit breakers.”⁷ She says, “I just do not think our psyches were

⁶ From Pathways to Peace, a United Nations organization: <https://pathwaystopeace.org/peace-wheel/>

⁷ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “If you can’t take in anymore, there’s a reason,” Aug. 17, 2021, https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres?fbclid=IwAR3pfZdyrcduKkWFdL6DFIZ90FKuVQB7CtiYUHs_k8SjQvFySakF1TfGcSI

developed to hold, feel, and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow, and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day.” People used to only take in what was happening “IN OUR VILLAGE,” not the entire globe. So, she recommends asking ourselves three questions: “What’s MINE to do, and what’s NOT mine to do? What’s MINE to say and what’s NOT mine to say? And the third one is harder: What’s MINE to care about and what’s NOT mine to care about?” We cannot do all the things and we cannot be all things to all people, especially during a pandemic. But we can do what’s ours to do with great love. Of all of these justice issues that we have discussed this Fall, even if we each work at one, we will have made a meaningful contribution. They’re all connected, meaning that working for justice in one area affects others, too. In Jesus’ time, many of the Temple and religious leaders were very concerned with the purity laws about which things were clean and unclean. They believed that uncleanness was contagious. Jesus flipped that on its head in his life and teachings, living in such a way as if compassion were contagious, as if grace and justice were contagious. What a wonderful world it is when we live like that, too.

I want to close my sermon with a prayer from Voices Together 1058:
*May God bless you with a restless discomfort
about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.
May God bless you with holy anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.
May God bless you with the gift of tears
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation,
or the loss of all that they cherish,
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.
May God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,
so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.*