

God's Renewal

Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

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Scripture: Acts 11:1-18 and Rev. 21:1-6

Hymns: Voices Together 428 "Praise with Joy the World's Creator" and 377 "New Earth, Heavens New."

Acts 11:1-18 (NRSV):

Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV):

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. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ 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 and be their God;
⁴ 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."

⁵ 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." ⁶ 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.

It was about a year ago that I picked up a copy of *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*, edited by Canadian faith writer, Sarah Bessey. This is so timely! I thought to myself. We're all in need of some renewal right now, in the midst of this very long pandemic season. But I was somewhat surprised to find that Bessey begins the book by acknowledging that there was a time when prayer was not renewing for her.¹ She used to pray in a very results-oriented way, in a prosperity-gospel kind of way that is about "controlling outcomes": if you ask God for health, wealth, and happiness, you'll receive it. But after the tragic experience of losing a young person she loved, this kind of prayer didn't make sense to her anymore; if it didn't work, why bother praying? So she stopped, and she speaks of this as "losing prayer." But what happened in her losing that kind of prayer is that she discovered a multitude of other ways to pray; losing the miracle-or-bust attitude toward prayer made space for her to reimagine prayer altogether. She learned liturgical prayer and ancient prayers, and the biblical prayers of the Psalms and elsewhere, which are honest and raw, bringing any and all joys and sorrows and anger and delight to God. She writes,

There is room for your whole self in prayer. You can bring your whole body to this altar, this place where you meet God with words or with wordless knowing. You don't need to pretend you aren't angry, that you aren't cynical or afraid, that you aren't feeling a bit hopeless or uncomfortable or envious or tired. That's how a lot of the Psalms came to be, after all. ... We bring our whole self to God and find Love was our home all along. That's where we find that our desert will bloom with flowers, the rivers will run again, everything will be redeemed.²

In allowing her understanding of prayer to evolve and grow, she discovered a deeper form of prayer that truly brings renewal, even resurrection.

¹ She also speaks about this in a podcast with Bible scholar Pete Enns: Interview with Sarah Bessey: Why Bother Praying? on *The Bible for Normal People* podcast, <https://peteenns.com/interview-with-sarah-bessey-why-bother-praying/>

² Sarah Bessey, ed. "Introduction," in *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal* (New York: Convergent, 2021), xvi-xvii.

The lectionary texts for today also speak of a kind of evolving, changing understanding of faith, all within the extended season of Easter, when we allow ourselves to sit with the mystery of resurrection. In Acts 11, the early church is finding its way – through a lot of trial and error, it seems! Just before this passage, Peter has met Cornelius and had this strange vision asking him to eat unclean animals, to break the laws around kosher food. When he returns to Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians are very critical, asking him why he’s ministering to the Gentiles, even eating with them! Doesn’t he know that Gentiles don’t follow the Jewish laws around kosher food?

In one sense, this passage is dripping with irony. The disciples have just gone through Jesus’ whole ministry, Jesus’ death and resurrection, and they’re still surprised that the church is meant to include Gentiles! They just don’t get it, here, despite the Gospel of Luke emphasizing this point many times as Jesus crosses that social/political boundary between Jewish and Gentile peoples again and again (and remember Luke is the “prequel” to Acts). They sound more like the Pharisees here than like the people who have followed Jesus and have been given responsibility for continuing his ministry of the radical welcome table. So they confront Peter when he returns from Cornelius’s house.

In another sense, however, this skepticism is a very understandable reaction given how profound a change this was from their previous way of life and identity as Jewish people. Commentator Karl Kuhn explains it this way:

[S]uch purity norms reinforced for Israelites their identity as a people set apart to serve God, to honor God’s Torah, and to receive God’s deliverance. Purity codes for many Israelites, including these circumcised believers, emerged from and reinforced Israelite understandings of how creation, humanity, and daily life were

to be ordered, or “mapped out.” In short, purity is about things (objects, food, times, people) in their proper place, as ordained by God.³

Peter is, in their view, being “improper” and breaking important religious laws; he’s muddying the waters of who is an insider and who is an outsider. But in response, he recounts the vision he had, and the voice that said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 9). And he tells them how this household of Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, which would have been “an astonishing development for these Israelite believers!”⁴ This experience has convinced Peter that God’s love is wider than they had previously envisioned, embracing a group they had thought were outside of the people of God. “Who was I that I could hinder God?” he asks the other believers (v. 17). Kuhn



says that this whole story reflects “the boundary-breaking character of God’s redemptive work and the necessity of abandoning those ideologies which are ill-suited to God’s realm.”⁵ I was reminded of the cartoon by David Hayward of Jesus erasing the lines and boxes we tend to draw.⁶

³ Karl Kuhn, “Commentary on Acts 11:1-18,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-11-18-5>, paragraph 8.

⁴ Kuhn, paragraph 5.

⁵ Kuhn, paragraph 2.

⁶ David Hayward, <https://nakedpastor.com/products/eraser-poster>

While I was reading this, I couldn't help but remember the story that Bill Kruger, late member of this congregation, used to tell. When he and Helen lived in the U.S. in the 1960s, he was doing prison visitation among youth who were in prison simply for their sexual orientation, as it was illegal at that time to be part of the LGBTQ community. This was a very formative experience for him, leading him to speak out against the discrimination LGBTQ people were experiencing in society and the church. When people asked him how he could defend his position of inclusion and supporting same-sex marriage, he would say, "Who are we to cut short the long arm of God's grace?" – a question very similar to Peter's "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Like Sarah Bessey who had to "lose prayer" before she could take it up in a more profound, renewing way, the early Jewish Christians had to "lose" their prejudices against the Gentiles in order to make room for the new thing that God was doing among them: forming a community shaped by the Risen One, called to walk in the new life of resurrection.

Our passage from Revelation 21 speaks poetically of what this new thing God is doing will effect. It speaks of a "new heaven and a new earth," a new, beautiful Jerusalem descending for God to dwell among mortals. And it speaks of God wiping "every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." God says, "See, I am making all things new."

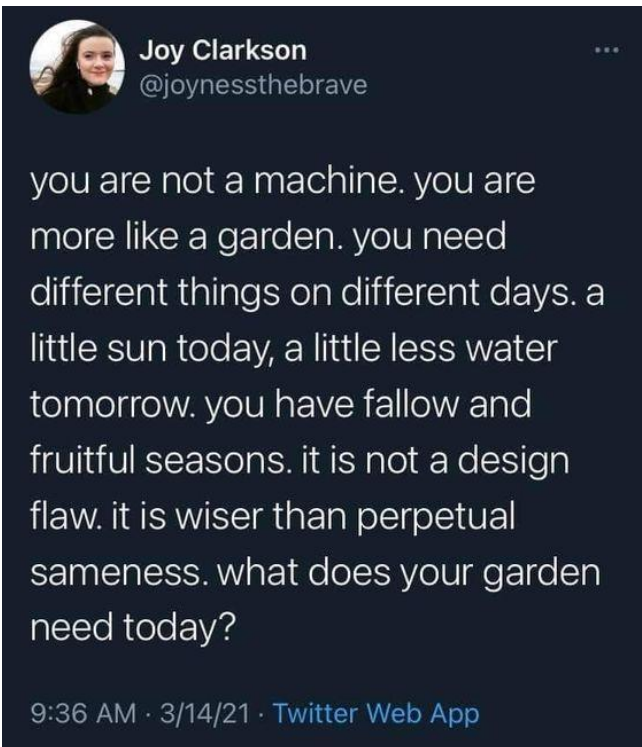
I'm always struck when I read this passage of how it turns some of our expectations upside down. Rather than whisking us away to some otherworldly heaven, God descends to dwell among us mortals. Rather than giving up on the earth, God renews both heaven and earth with God's presence. Maybe, in the same way that the

risen Christ still bore the wounds of the cross, God's renewal isn't about erasing what came before. It's also not novelty for the sake of novelty, which distracts us from things that might be painful or difficult. Instead, God takes up what was broken and renews it, not ignoring the tears but wiping them away, bringing the comfort of the water of life to those who were overwhelmed by grief, death, and pain, and thereby making all things new. Bible scholar Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza has pointed out that: "The new Jerusalem [is] the anti-image of the great city Babylon/Rome. [John] contrasts the splendor and power of the Roman Empire with that of the empire of God and Christ in order to encourage readers to resist the murderous power of Rome."⁷ The next chapter will go on to describe God's coming reign as a beautiful garden – a life-giving place of healing and renewal so different from the fear, destruction, and violence of Rome.

As we continue to process our experience of the last few years of living through a pandemic, I wonder if we can take a moment to recognize the ways in which we have been a source of renewal for one another over the past several years. We have weathered this very difficult season remarkably well as a faith community, remaining connected with one another, worshipping and serving together, sharing and grieving together, wiping away the tears from one another's eyes. This is no small thing! And yet, I had a conversation with some church folks this past week that made me wonder whether we also need to look ahead as a community. As we slowly emerge from this time of pandemic, we don't want to simply go back to exactly the way things were before. Rather, we want to ask ourselves – what's been life-giving for us to carry

⁷ Quoted in: C. Wess Daniels, "Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6," *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-211-6-5>

forward? And what can we let go of to make room for this newness? How can we work at being a community of God's renewal for each other and for our wider context?



I close with a lovely image from Joy Clarkson that may help us start thinking in those directions using the image of a garden. This applies to us as individuals but also, I would say, to the church community, which is also an organic, living thing. She writes, "You are not a machine. You are more like a garden. You need different things on different days. A little sun today, a little less water tomorrow. You have fallow

and fruitful seasons. It is not a design flaw. It is wiser than perpetual sameness. What does your garden need today?" May that question guide us as we continue to seek God's renewal. AMEN