

Lectionary Scriptures
in message / liturgy:

Ephesians 3: 14 – 21

3,425 words

Additional Scripture
references:

Revelation 21: 1 – 5
Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 15
Psalm 146: 6
Matthew 28: 19 – 20

Key songs:

VU 713 I See a New Heaven
MV 94 Love Knocks and Waits
MV 165 There Is A Time
VU 336 Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies

Additional music:

Until We Sing Again (Joseph M. Martin)
The Now and the Not Yet (Amy Grant)
Olde Irish Blessing (Linda Fletcher)
(by reference: We'll Meet Again)

We'll Meet Again

*We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when.
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.*

Those lyrics come from possibly the best known song of the World War II era, and I'm sure you can all immediately hear it sung in the late Dame Vera Lynn's voice.

It's obvious why the song resonated with a nation, and indeed a world, plunged into a gloomy mood of darkness at the outbreak of the war.

The prescription is in the second half of the chorus:

Keep smiling through

Just like you always do

'Til the blue skies chase those dark clouds far away.

Often, in life, we are faced with unknowns.

We don't like unknowns. We've been conditioned to plan for every eventuality, to always be thinking ahead, and to look to the future.

We like to feel we are in control.

We like to know what the plan is.

Many of you will have heard me, at some point in time, remark (when everything seems to have magically come together) that it's always been clear that someone has a plan for us... but if it didn't seem like that when we set out, it's just that the plan isn't always shared with us in advance.

Four years ago, I think everyone's feeling of things being out of control took full flight. We'd just marked four months of an unprecedented response to a hitherto-unknown level of upheaval in the form of a global Pandemic. What had started off as a few days of looking around and sitting at home in mid-March had now become a complete lack of certainty about where things were going.

What we thought would have been a few weeks was now dragging on with no end in sight.

That's the same place of uncertainty that the song sung 85 years ago by Vera Lynn captured, as the world was plunged into yet another war, after we'd been promised that the last one was the war to end all wars.

As we prepare to take a month-long break from weekly Sunday worship services, that represents another gap, and for similar reasons. We really don't know what comes next.

Between searching for a new minister and always being concerned about the future of our congregation, a break or a gap, even for a month, starts to make us think about what is on the other side of the gap.

So we, too, are in that place of uncertainty, and it makes us uncomfortable. We don't like to talk about it, and yet, we must.

We sang a hymn this morning about a new heaven and a new earth. The song is based on the start of the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation, which reads like this:

1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" **5** He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Eschatology, from Ancient Greek *eskatos* meaning 'last', concerns expectations of the end of the present age, human history, or the world itself. The end of the world or end times is predicted by several world religions (both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic), which teach that negative world events will reach a climax. Belief that the end of the world is imminent is known as apocalypticism, and over time has been held both by members of mainstream religions and by doomsday

cults. In the context of mysticism, the term refers metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and to reunion with the divine. Religions treat eschatology as a future event prophesied in sacred texts or in folklore. While other religions may have concepts of renewal or transformation after significant events, the explicit description of a new earth is primarily found in Christian teachings within the context of eschatology, and is mainly described in Revelation chapter 21 as we just read.

The book of Revelation is something that always is a bit fuzzy and mystical to most people. Why is that?

Revelation contains 22 chapters with a total of 404 verses. Of those, no more than 41 verses total are ever read on Sundays, and only every third year during the Easter Season (Year C) or on Christ the King Sunday (Year B) do they come up in the lectionary. The reading from chapter 21, concerning a new heaven and new earth, comes up in Year C on the fifth Sunday of Easter but is a bit of an exception - it also always comes up New Year's Day, as it does speak about new things and is in keeping with the idea of starting a new year.

Thus, about 90% of the Book of Revelation is never read in church at all.

So what do we all know about Revelation?

Probably not much! All many of us know is that it is full of end-times imagery - and perhaps for that reason, it's another of those subjects we don't like to talk about.

Partly, this is because it means coming to terms with change. The implication is that everything we know now will go away, and be replaced with something different. The clear implication is that it will be replaced with something better, but, as we've said before - different makes us uncomfortable, whether better or not.

Partly, it's because the talk of endings reinforces the idea that, some day, we won't be here. On a personal level, we all die. All creatures on the earth are, in the words of a popular song by George Strait, "here for a good time, not a long time."

Or to quote from another song, there's "a time to be born and a time to die" (from Turn, Turn, Turn as sung by The Byrds) which, of course, comes from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verses 1 - 15 ...

1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,

4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,

5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

6 a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away,

7 a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,

8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

To everything there is a season... a time for everything.

And not just us individually. Organizations have a shelf life too. Governments rise and fall, to be replaced by other governments that, in turn, also fall. Even countries change over time. The map of the world is a far different place than it once was.

Churches and institutions that were the cornerstone of their community are no longer here; and yet, at the same time, there are new churches and institutions appearing... there are several in our community that weren't here even ten years ago.

So it is clearly ordained by God that all things shall change, and the old will be replaced by the new. And it's obviously God's prerogative to put together such a plan. As we learn in Psalm 146, God is the maker of heaven and earth and all that is in it.

And yet, we still don't like to talk about it.

It's still an uncertain future, and we don't like it.

We're happier when we talk about the origin of things, even if that origin is many thousands of years ago. We like to know where we came from, because that, being all in the past, is history, and, if it was recorded correctly, is fairly certain. We like certainty, and that's what the past represents, for those are things that have happened.

We're much more uncomfortable with things in the future, because we don't know what those are going to be.

National Public Radio host Terry Gross wrote on the subject of end times recently. He said *"A lot of people have been nervously joking in the past couple of years that it seems like the End Times - with the pandemic, record-setting floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and fires, environmental crises, war and fears that democracies are becoming more authoritarian. For those who take the New Testament's Book of Revelation literally, they may actually believe this is the End Times. The End Times have been prophesied dating back to at least the time of Jesus, who preached the end was near."*

The description of the end in Revelation reads like a horror film, with fantastical, monstrous beasts and giant, surreal insects, as well as plagues, wars, a lake of fire and torture. That's what those who haven't accepted Jesus as the Messiah will face. Believers will rise to heaven to be with God. Revelation is the most controversial book in the New Testament. Many scholars think it shouldn't have been included in the Bible."

Todd Forest, lecturer in theology at Grand Canyon University, writes:

"The end of times is not a mere science-fiction foundation for B rated movies. It is a specific biblical teaching and knowing the end is as important as knowing our origins. The study of end times is known as the study of Eschatology. It comes from a Greek term that means the study of last things or times.

So, if there is an end what does it look like? Will it be good or bad and what is God's role in this? The good news for the Believer is, just as God created the heavens and the earth, he is still in control when this earth, as we know it, no longer exists.

Christians, philosophers and scientists tend to all agree that there is a clock that is winding down on life and earth as we know it. Whether we look to the book of Revelation in the Bible or to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, there is a predicted end to all things. Our world has seen its share of wars, plagues and natural disasters, but we have always rebounded and life goes on. There will be a day when a physical and spiritual reckoning occurs and there will be an end to life as we know it."

Forest goes on to explain:

"The issue is not "if" things will end, but what is the perspective one should have in all of this? For the secular community, it is a time of annihilation and destruction. Whether life becomes a dismal existence for the final survivors as

they scratch out a life at the close of civilization, or spaceships carry humanity to another planet, the future tends not to be bright.

For the Christian community, suffering is understood, but there is what we call a Blessed Hope. Jesus Christ will return for the church to usher in the end of time as we know it. Hope for the Christian is not in the details of how Christ returns or the circumstances on the earth at that time. Hope is anchored in Christ's promise to return for us.

Jesus gave us a mandate in Matthew 28:19 to make disciples in this world. He further comforted us in verse 20 when he states:

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (NIV)"

And this, Forest concludes, is why all the end-times horror in Revelation shouldn't faze us:

"For the Christian community, even if there is some discomfort and disagreement in the details, it is also a time of comfort and confidence. The source of this is our trust in God. Knowing he is just and loving and knows all but still loves completely is a place of security that fosters our Blessed Hope.

Jesus will return for his people. God will judge Satan, creation and humankind. This judgment is a source of joy for those who know their sins have been removed by a relationship with Jesus Christ. For others, the Bible says it is a day of dread. The beauty of this is that you get to choose what the end of times will look like for you. It will be a day of rejoicing of the end of the toil of this earth and forever life in eternity with our God or it will be taking responsibility for our sinful behavior in eternal separation from God."

The anthem we just sang, “Until We Sing Again” has quickly become a favourite with our choir, and for a few years now, it’s become our “end of the season” song before everyone takes our summer break.

Actually, in 2018 (the first year we sang it) and the next year, we used it as our Choral Blessing for the last service in June, and then concluded our last service in July with our other perennial favourite, Linda Fletcher’s arrangement of the Olde Irish Blessing.

Ever since the Pandemic, we’ve used both at the end of July, as we’re doing this morning.

It’s our way of saying that, despite the fact we’re not going to be worshipping together until the fall, that we will sing again, as a choir and as a congregation.

It’s a form of certainty in an uncertain world. It’s an affirmation that we believe there is more ahead, and we’re going to leave this morning knowing that we will be back, singing and worshipping together, in the future.

Even that, though, is sometimes at odds with our feeling of uncertainty.

My search for answers to the questions of uncertainty have often led me to music, and most of you know that one of my favourite contemporary Christian artists is Amy Grant.

She has produced a lot of music over the years, but I think most of her best work was on the 1984 album *Straight Ahead*, including the song *The Now and the Not Yet*.

It was the final song on the album, and is a song all about that change from what we have and where we are now, to what we will have and where we will be tomorrow.

Some of the lyrics read as follows:

*No longer what we saw before,
But not all that we will see.
Tomorrow, when we lock the door,
On all our disbelieving,
When He appears (holy, holy),
Our view will clear,
And we'll be changed by His glory,
Wrapped up in His glory...
But I'm caught in between
The now and the not yet;
Sometimes it seems like
Forever and ever,
That I've been reaching to be
All that I am,
But I'm only a few steps nearer,
Yet I'm nearer....*

It talks about being changed by God's glory and how that glory will wrap us up and surround us. It also talks about how that's the future, not where we are today.

But I think it's an important reminder of what is promised to us.

When we worry about our future (which might be the metaphorical tomorrow, but could also be the very real tomorrow as in Monday July 29th if we have a problem we can't solve, or we have a need that isn't met) we need to remember the promise that we will be changed by God's glory.

When we meet to discuss where our congregation goes from here, and what the future looks like (whether we're talking about September, or the years to come), we need to remember that promise.

When we read the news and hear of unrest elsewhere in the world, we need to remember God's promise to us.

So when we read as we did this morning, in chapter 3 of Ephesians:

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, **19** and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

we are reminded again of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

And we need reminding of that, time and time again.

Because we don't know what the future holds - but what we do know is that God has a future planned for us.

That's as real to us here, in our families and our congregation, as it was to those in a world plunged into uncertainty and war. It was just as real at the start of the Pandemic, and, despite that uncertainty, here we all are. We wondered if we'd ever worship together again - and the fact that we're sitting here this morning gives us the answer.

Humans have a tendency to plan for all the “what if’s” and we tend to dwell on the negative ones. “What if” more people don’t come out to church? “What if” we can’t find a new minister by September? “What if” we can’t see a clear path towards the future. “What if” somebody gets sick? “What if” the money isn’t there?

What if, indeed. Why plan for negative outcomes? Is that what Scripture tells us to do?

Be aware of the possibilities, yes, but don’t dwell on them. That approach is inconsistent with God’s promise to us. From the very beginning of the book of Genesis to the very end of the book of Revelation, God wasn’t planning for negative outcomes. God was forging ahead.

God still is forging ahead with His plan. Our job is to believe what we have read and what has been revealed to us, and then apply that to our lives going forward.

The stories in the Bible are not focused on what was. They all drive towards what is yet to come.

Until we sing again, may your days be filled with hope, may the long and winding road be paved with peace.

Remember that we will meet again.

And then we’ll meet again, after that.

And yet again.

Until finally we all meet everyone again in the warmth of God's glory wrapped around us.

The promise of God is clear, and we must overcome our uncertainty to believe in this certain future.

God is good, and has a plan for us.

The plan may not have been shared with us in advance, but the plan has been clearly promised.

Revelation isn't a horror movie. It's a promise of hope.

So we'll take our break for a few weeks, and then come back together with a renewed feeling of optimism and common purpose. If we believe what God has revealed to us in Scripture, then we know that there is a plan, and there is something better ahead.

Over the next few minutes, as we listen to Amy Grant sing about "the now and the not yet," think about examples around you that show God's promise and the hope of a better tomorrow.

Remember that if you're caught in between the now and the not yet, even if you are only a few steps nearer, you are, indeed, nearer.

Replace uncertainty with knowledge that there is a certain future, and keep your faith in the God who has created and is creating, and gives us infinite grace.

Only then can we move forward, knowing that God is with us, always.