

“Anticipating the New Creation”

By Dr. Adrian Langdon

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Readings:

Revelation 21:1-6

Good morning! It is an honour and a privilege to be with you today as we worship and look at God’s word together. My name is Adrian Langdon, and I am the director of the Leadership Centre at the Presbyterian College in Montreal. This past week at the college we had our annual Equip and Encourage conference for pastors and I was glad that your own pastor Rev. Frances Savill was there.

As we proceed, you might suspect that I am a little either naïve or perhaps confused in my choice of topics this. I am going to speak about creation care, but I am going to do so by looking at the Book of Revelation.

Creation care might be something new for you. I admit that it was not something that was a part of my church tradition. However, it is an important issue that Churches have begun to address. As Christians sometimes we need to broaden our view of what it means to be Christian. Not because God changes, but because contexts change.

You might think that the book of Revelation is the furthest from creation care than we can get. It has images of destruction and waste. And not only that, it seems to be concerned with images of another world, a heavenly realm, with thrones and angelic beings, beyond the created order. However, John is speaking to real life Christians –their struggles and hopes – and about the future of our world – not another world.

So let’s explore [**Creation and the “New Jerusalem”**]

John is writing **to urban Christians, and maybe a few who were rural** – not unlike us here in North Bay.

The book is addressed to Christian communities in seven different cities in Asia Minor – which makes up most of what is today Turkey. These cities were deeply connected and dependent on the city of Rome and its empire. On the one hand, the Roman empire created a certain stability for Christians, but on the other hand, there were times of persecution. There was a major tension between the good things that Rome brought and its tendency to exploit people and places for financial gain.

Today, Christians live with a similar ambiguity. We live and work and serve in places that provide many good benefits, but there may be negative side effects. Our economy provides many goods and services that enable us to survive and sometimes flourish. But these same systems cause global temperatures to rise, pollution and waste to increase, more forests are cut down each year, and good land continues to be eroded. And that's not to mention the modern meat industry.

We seem to be trapped in an ambiguous system, one that not only provides for our needs but at the same time degrades God's good creation.

In the face of such tensions, the book of Revelation calls believers to remain faithful. In Rev 1:9, John reminds his audience to have **“patient endurance”**, which is repeated in chapter 3 (v. 10) and in chapter 13, where believers are told to have **“patience endurance and faithfulness”** (v.10).

But what is the basis of John's hope? How can he call for patient endurance?

The book of revelation assumes what the rest of the NT assumes: that God the Father sends his Son into the world, in the power of the Spirit, to rescue us from sin and suffering. God does this because God loves us. In fact, God

is love. The book of revelation assumes this, though it uses highly symbolic language and images.

John puts his hope in God's love, even in the face of Roman persecution. His message is that the centre of history is not Rome, or any other political power. Neither Egypt, nor Babylon, nor the United States, nor Canada are the center. In fact, the powers of this world – no matter how much money or technology they have – don't have the final say. They will all come under the judgement of the God who creates and redeems the world in love. In the end, God's love wins.

Of course, this is an audacious claim. John, an insignificant prophet banished to the Island of Patmos, declares that mighty Rome will fall and that God's people will endure. In John's time, Christianity was growing but it only made up 0.1 percent of the population of the Roman empire. John and all the Christians in the world were insignificant.

However, John was right. It took a number of centuries, but the mighty Roman empire did fall, and the Christian faith endured and flourished through it all.

But John's book of Revelation also points to a *final end*, when God's love, mercy, and justice will establish an everlasting and universal peace, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. A time when God will "wipe every tear from their eyes; mourning and crying and pain will be no more". This is presented in chapters 21 and 22, where the new Jerusalem descends from heaven onto earth. It is important to clarify that a "new heaven and a new earth" does not mean that the old earth is destroyed and God makes a totally new one. That would justify climate change. Why do anything if everything is going to be destroyed. Rather, the "New heaven and the new earth" means that God seeks to transform our present world not to destroy it.

When John uses the image of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21 and 22 it represents at least three things.

1. God's Full presence.

What makes this the final shalom, the final Kingdom of God, is that God is fully present. God's presence is not veiled or hidden. As it states: "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them ... God himself will be with them". When God's full glory and presence is manifested, sin and suffering will be no more.

2. The New Jerusalem Reconciles Humans and Creation (Garden-City)

It is fascinating that Revelation does not picture a return to the Garden of Eden. Rather, the new Jerusalem is like a Garden-City that combines the rural with the urban. The passage does point to the garden of Eden, a paradise where humans were in harmony with the rest of creation. But things are reworked. The precious stones of Genesis 2 are mentioned, though now they have been refined. The river of life is there to nourish. The Tree of life is there as well, but not just for Adam and Eve. The Tree of life surrounds the river and produces a variety of fruit "for the healing of the nations". There will provision for all. All of this points to a reconciliation not only with God, but a healing of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. God's final shalom has no place for the exploitation of nature.

3. The New creation is about people

The walls of the city have twelve gates, representing Israel, and there are twelve foundations, referring the apostles. The New Jerusalem is also described as "the bride, the wife of the lamb", an image for the church -that's us. But it also international. Earlier it says that God will dwell with his "peoples", the plural is used. It is not just the Israelites, the kingdom of God is international in scope. Its gates are

always open, and the people of the world will come and go from it.

So, Revelation 21 and 22 points to a future when there will be an ultimate shalom, a final peace and reconciliation between God, humans, and the rest of creation.

But does that mean we just sit around and wait for it? Does our patient endurance mean sitting and twiddling our thumbs? Absolutely not. As Christians, we are called to **anticipate this final peace with creation.**

There are two important lines that are easy to skip over in Chapter 21:

“the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (v. 24) and two verses later:

“People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations” (v. 26)

What does this mean? How do rulers, nations, and people like us, bring glory into this New Jerusalem, this new Garden-City?

Well, how do you get a good reputation today? You get a good reputation by doing good work. If you are an honest mechanic who gets vehicles running again, you will get a good reputation. If you are a salesperson who is friendly and helpful, you will get good reviews.

When these verses speak about people bringing their glory, this refers to the things they do well. Things that honour God and his creatures.

There is a clear challenge for Christians today: in light of ecological degradation, how can we anticipate the peace between humans and the rest of creation?

I have seven suggestions for things we can start with. I know there are large social, economic, and political things we need to help with. But these suggestions will focus on our own lives and church. This is not exhaustive, and I am sure there are many things we could add.

I would suggest gradually implementing and experimenting with such practices. And of course, have fun and be creative.

Seven Creation Care Practices

i. Get outside and enjoy Creation

Here I am thinking about us enjoying the natural world, being marveled by God's good creation – like the Psalms often state. When you do this, cultivate the virtue of **wonder**. This may also lead to **worship** but also an appreciation for the **livingness of the world**.

ii. Get your hands dirty

If you have room, plant a small garden. Grow some food if you can. And if you don't have a garden grow something you have to take care of. Even a plant will do. The point of this is not that it will save you time or money, but it will remind you of how we are dependent on the earth and other forms of life for our sustenance. As Genesis 2 puts it, we were created "to till and keep the land".

iii. Eat one "earth friendly" meal a week

By earth friendly, I mean try and find food that is grown locally and uses sustainable agriculture, agriculture that looks out for the long-term health of the land and soil. Keeping the land healthy is an important theme in scripture that we too often neglect. And when it comes to meat, try to find some that is free-range or even wild game.

iv. Resist Consumerism: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair, Appreciate

A central problem with our consumer culture is that we are trained to buy new things even if we don't need them. Then when something new comes along we are supposed to detach ourselves from things we have to buy even newer

things. And so the cycle continues. I think we need to resist is.

So don't just recycle (as most of us probably do) but also reduce, reuse, repair, and appreciate what we have. I just recently realized that in raising our children I haven't taught them to repair enough. While we have reduced, reused and recycled, we didn't work repairing.

v. Start a Creation Care team at Church

I know at Calvin you have some wonderful ministries; your pastor Frances has spoken about the great leadership here. I don't want to add to your busy lives, but perhaps God might be calling some of you to start a green team that thinks about how the church can learn and practice its faith in relation to creation. Look around and see what other churches or the Presbyterian Church in Canada is doing. Why not partner with other churches, learn and work together.

vi. Green Community Connections

Creation care within the church can also lead to making connections outside the church. Could church land be used to grow food that is then given away to a food bank or food kitchen? Or could the church host a **community garden**?

Could church property be used to host **Community Supported Agriculture** on Saturday mornings? Why not. Are there local creation care projects or organizations that Calvin could partner or **collaborate with**?

vii. Sacramental Spirituality

In your spiritual practices, bring in the rest of creation. Turn wonder walks into prayer and praise walks. During personal prayer time, take a deep breath and thank God for the trees and plants that provided the oxygen for your lungs and body. Thank God for the ground beneath your feet. Thank God for the water you drink that fell from the clouds and made its way into your glass. When you say grace,

remember how we are dependent on other parts of creation for food.

One of the two sacraments that Presbyterians practice is communion or the Lords Supper. It might not be obvious to us today, but for ancient Christians they would have known the fields where the bread and wine came from. They would have known the people who made it. The Lord's supper recognizes our connection to, dependence on, and responsibility for the natural world. Christianity faith, at its centre, is earth friendly.

For the Christians today, I think these types of suggestions are essential for discipleship. They are not something we do to be trendy or relate to culture. They are essential for what it means to follow Jesus in a world of ecological degradation. This may seem odd or weird to us, but they arise from our obedience to the God who creates and redeems the world.

So may God grant us the wisdom, patience, courage, and creativity to be good stewards of creation until he comes. Amen.

Benediction:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (as we seek to be stewards of creation).

Amen, Amen, Amen.