

*“Behold, I am Making All Things New”*

We are now very quickly approaching the beginning of General Council 42 in Corner Brook NL on August 8th. Our moderator has encouraged congregations to reflect on General Council as the time approaches and so this Sunday I have based our worship on one the theme of GC42 "Behold, I Make All Things New".

This will be the first time I am going to General Council. I am going as a theological student and not a commissioner. I felt led very early on to want to be present for this year's council. I was not sure why and I'm still not entirely sure. I am a newcomer to the United Church having grown up in an Evangelical denomination. The part of the United Church I felt most uncomfortable with was the polity. As I prepare as a candidate for ministry in the United Church I have now set about to resolve this discomfort and seek to learn how the Spirit moves through the meetings, councils and courts of the church. My journey to General Council this year I hope will be a milestone in my learning and understanding and belonging in this United Church of Ours.

Our scripture, which the GC42 theme comes from, is from the book of Revelation. This alone made me a bit nervous when preparing this sermon. The Book of Revelation is full of amazing but mystifying visions received by someone named John. Traditionally the author has been understood to be John, Jesus' beloved disciple and author of the Gospel of John. However, there is actually no historical evidence that these two Johns are the same person.

John's vision in this passage presents the image of a new heaven and a new earth. This reflects the early Christian communities hope in the resurrection and return of Jesus as the messiah. Jews believe that

the messiah will bring about God's kingdom on Earth where the Messiah will rule from Jerusalem over God's people. Most scholars believe John recorded this vision in the 80s or 90s CE about 10 years after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and amongst heavy persecution of both Jews and Christians by Rome. This vision of a new heaven and a new earth would have been powerful to these early communities of faith.

In the year 70 CE, there was a rebellion of Jews in Jerusalem and the Roman Empire destroyed the city, the temple, executed thousands and sent everyone else into exile away. In this context one can try to begin to understand the power of John's vision and the hope it could bring to these early followers of Jesus. A new heaven and a new earth ruled by Jesus gave hope and meaning to believers who did not know if they would be safe or persecuted from day to day. Since, Jerusalem had been destroyed, the vision of a new Jerusalem descending from heaven would have had particular meaning.

Jesus says, "Behold, I am making all things new". As the United Church approaches General Council 42 with this as the theme, it brings the same hope that this message from Jesus brought to the early Christians. But it could also bring to us some worry or fear. Questions such as, why do we need to make everything new again? or what is wrong with the way we have been up until now? might arise. Who is going to get to decide what things will be made new and what things will remain the same? and what if I don't like this "new world order?"

As the church moves into this potentially milestone General Council we must remember that it is Jesus who is the one who is going to make all things new, not us. This is an important thing to remember.

We, on our own, without our faith, can never make anything new like Jesus showed John in this vision. We cannot build a new heaven and a new earth or construct a new Jerusalem on our own. We cannot usher in the future of the United Church on our own. We need to follow and live into the future that Jesus has prepared for us.

We must remember that the call from Jesus is not to do this work all on our own but to partner with God as our leader and guide as we create and recreate our world as God's world. As much as we think we get to debate and decide the future of our church among us, it is really not us alone that go to General Council. Throughout the United Church's history we can see and hear the testimony of those that have gone before into 41 previous General Councils unsure of their future, that God is with us. Our United Church creed bears witness to this, as "we are not alone, we live in God's world". Our church has always recognized that is not our own work that we do, but it is us as people who are called who do God's work in God's world. We must remain focused on this call from Jesus as we gather at General Council 42 this year. If we are going to live into a "new United Church" it will be new because God has created and is creating not because we have decided to recreate it on our own.

Revelation may be the last book of the Bible but theologically I don't think it was intended to represent an end but rather a transition from the old way into the new. It might be tempting to think of Revelation as the "happy ending" where the rousing music is queued, the screen fades to black and the credits roll and everyone lives happily ever after, but I think that Revelation is more of a cliffhanger. The Bible never says what will happen when the Messianic kingdom arrives and the church, Christ's bride is presented to Christ the bridegroom. But

like human weddings, I assume this heavenly marriage is not an end but a beginning of a new work led by Jesus Christ and in loving partnership with his bride, which is us, God's people. John heard a voice say, "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."

The first things have passed away. Perhaps Revelation is telling us that is it not the end but the beginning and that the whole Bible is nothing but the prologue to God's story? We are now 90 years into the history of the United Church but I'd like to think that we are still only in the beginning of our story. Perhaps one day in the distant future the United Church will look back on General Council 42 in 2015 not as we do now as the end of our old ways and the beginning of a new journey but as the transition between the prologue and the beginning of the first part of our church's story. This is similar to how we now look back on John's revelation. When John first wrote his vision it would have reached a church unsure of its future, struggling against persecution, internal conflict and theological debates. We now see the first century as but the end of the prologue of church history, when the beginnings were just starting of a journey that continues today.

As someone just beginning ministry in the United Church, I remain firm in my hope and expectation that our church will not only survive but thrive. We will continue to help Canadians and people around the world, sharing God's love with them and helping them where they are at. We will continue to help people raise children and families and tell them the story of Jesus. I think the most important message in the Bible and particularly in the book of Revelation is that we do not decide

the last word in the story, but that God always gets the final word. We will not die and our church will not die, God will have the final word and that word is: "Death will be no more." In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone, Thanks be to God, Amen.

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