

## **“Imagine”**

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, May 18, 2025

Texts: John 13: 31-35 and Revelation 21: 1-7

I remember driving down Springgay Road on my way home a couple of weeks ago looking at all the broken trees all around me. At the time, I couldn't imagine what they would look like when Spring came. They looked so broken. Dead. My mind told me that it wasn't that bad, but my eyes couldn't believe anything but the worst. It applies to so many aspects of our life – our inability to see anything good in the future. We see only what is broken and have a hard time imagining anything else but what we see in front of us. Why is it so hard to imagine something good, beautiful, and wonderful?

I do think some of it is conditioning. We are bombarded with bad news and often have a hard time seeing possibility, hope and a future that we can look forward to. We often experience brokenness, pain, hurt and destruction. Every day we see reports of a new major storm with the commentary from the reporters of some iteration of, “we haven't seen this in 100 years!” It seems like we live through a 100-year storm somewhere in the country – let alone the world – every few days. Weather events aren't the only things that can keep us from seeing anything good ahead. Medical prognosis, financial issues, job change or loss, relationship trouble, family strife – you name it. In fact, Friday night at the Summer Concert Series I got into a conversation with someone who is increasingly afraid of storms. Predictions of severe weather bother this person so much more than they ever did. The ice storm left an impact on many in our region. Agencies and governments are still helping

people put the pieces together just in time for the next storm. It can be discouraging. It can be frightening.

Financial hits vary, but for some, each storm brings up a fear of what could happen and whether insurance will cover it, and whether a person can afford the deductible—again. And then there are the inevitable rising insurance rates ahead. I could go on forever, but you get the idea. For many of you, I am not telling you anything you already know. No one is surprised that many people find it hard to imagine anything but pain and suffering going forward. It is a struggle for many people.

In the case of the early church, it was much the same. I don't know about their weather patterns, but I do know that they suffered unimaginable persecution. The book of Revelation—a book so misunderstood by so many – is a codebook that was shared to help people manage all the persecution around them. Many of us today have heard the book of Revelation as this bad news story of God's destruction, save for the few who survive. I think it's a misreading, but more than that, I find it interesting that many in the religious world speak of the judgment of Revelation, but never get to the best part, Chapter 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup>I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. God will dwell with them, and they will be God's peoples. God will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup>The Divine will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." <sup>5</sup>Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new.

Can you imagine it? Many people cannot. They'll gladly speak of the end of the world, but only as destruction while the faithful remnant is sent off to heaven in a glorious

reunion with the holy. And they warn, you'd better get your faith in order, or you won't be part of the 144,000 who participate in this future. I cannot understand why it seems so important to so many Christians to escape this world when the Lord of the church said things like, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand", or "on earth as it is in heaven", or virtually every sentence of Revelation 21. The people of the book of Revelation could see possibility, hope, and a future beyond imagination here on earth where humanity is fully reunited with God. That is, if you believe we're separated in the first place. Much of the Bible would argue that point. But, for today, I hope for you that your imagination can be reborn, renewed, and restored such that you can see possibility in a world bent on impossibility! I hope that you can see God at work in even the most broken of places in the world, in our nation, in our community, and in your own life.

Our imagination fails us when it comes to people as well. We look at someone with a physical or mental disability and we decide what they can or cannot do. We see what is broken. We see people and label them disabled, when in truth they are differently abled. It is very often the case that when a person has a limitation in one area, other aspects of their physical, mental or emotional health are enhanced. Years ago, I worked in a group home. Despite the variety of mental and physical limitations that the clients there were dealing with, I have never met a group of people who were more caring—most of the time. Many had a great sense of humor or took great joy in things great and small that some of the staff missed completely. The point is that we often decide what someone can or cannot do based on one or two traits, while completely ignoring the whole of the person that they are. We act as though folks have nothing to offer, when in fact they have a whole host of gifts

that often go ignored. We leave people out when they can bring the greatest gifts to whatever we are doing. In short, our imagination fails us and everyone loses.

Many of you know I was gone for several days attending my oldest son's graduation in Arizona. Like I described at the beginning of this message, things looked bleak in the Gaylord area. The trees looked like broken matchsticks, and I wondered what would become of them this Spring. Was I surprised? Absolutely. More importantly, while I could still see all the brokenness of the trees (that didn't go away), I could see life and life abundantly in the leaves that came from trees I was sure were dead. Life was in front of me everywhere and I had to stop, just like I did one morning on the same patch of road the week of the ice storm and a couple of times since. Where I had seen only mourning and pain, suffering, and work to do, now there was life in front of me. I told a friend about it, and they remarked that on one tree of theirs, the only branch that has leaves on it is the one that had broken partially from the main tree trunk. I don't know the future for that tree, but I know that it is a reminder that even the most broken can be alive.

That is true of the trees. That is true of our communities. That is true for each of us. While it's no secret that each of us has some degree of brokenness, God's final word is not a word of judgment and death, but a word of life. "And death will be no more," says the author of this morning's scripture. Completely beyond my imagination, and yet, before my eyes I see a lot of things that I can't imagine ever turning out well and wondering, what else does God have in store that I cannot see? Further, what is my role in restoration, hope, the reuniting of heaven and earth? What am I doing to with all this beauty in front of me that not too long ago was only destruction?

I did some research and came across some writings of Brian McLaren, an author that many of us around here love and respect:

There's a beautiful visionary scene at the end of the Book of Revelation that is as relevant today as it was in the first century. It doesn't picture us being evacuated from Earth to heaven as many assume. It pictures a New Jerusalem descending from heaven to Earth [see Revelation, chapter 21]. This new city doesn't need a temple because God's presence is felt everywhere. It doesn't need sun or moon because the light of Christ illuminates it from within. Its gates are never shut, and it welcomes people from around the world to receive the treasures it offers and bring the treasures they can offer. From the center of the city, from God's own throne, a river flows—a river of life or aliveness. Along its banks grows the Tree of Life. All of this, of course, evokes the original creation story and echoes God's own words in Revelation: "Behold! I'm making all things new!"

Rather than giving its original readers and hearers a coded blueprint of the future, Revelation gave them visionary insight into their present situation. It told them that the story of God's work in history has never been about escaping Earth and going up to heaven. It has always been about God descending to dwell among us. . . . God wasn't a distant, terrifying monster waiting for vengeance at the end of the universe. God was descending among us here and now, making the tree of true aliveness available for all. [1] (*Daily Meditations, Center for Action and Contemplation*, December 31, 2021).

He continues:

What was true for Revelation's original audience is true for us today. Whatever madman is in power, whatever chaos is breaking out, whatever danger threatens, the river of life is flowing now. The Tree of Life is bearing fruit now. True aliveness is available now. That's why Revelation ends with the sound of a single word echoing through the universe. That word is not *Wait!* Nor is it *Not Yet!* or *Someday!* It is a word of invitation, welcome, reception, hospitality, and possibility. It is a word not of ending, but of new beginning. That one word is *Come!* The Spirit says it to us. We echo it back. Together with the Spirit, we say it to everyone who is willing. *Come!* [3]

Can we imagine it is true? Is the author of Revelation correct? Is God somehow at work through all the brokenness, all the hurt and all the pain? I'm not at all saying that we don't have a role in creating that new heaven and new earth, but we have a partner in peace, a partner in hope, a partner in grace, a partner in imagination, a partner in restoration, a partner... And yet, we still find it so much easier to imagine judgment,

separation, and trouble than it is to imagine grace, unity, and peace. We could call it a lack of faith, I guess, but that's neither helpful nor true. It is our failure to imagine possibility when our lenses are only focused on impossibility. Just like the trees I saw on my way home. Something unimagined. Something possible. Something that God alone can see.

Richard Rohr reminds us that:

God put us in the world of passing things where everything changes and nothing remains the same. The only thing that doesn't change is change itself. It's a hard lesson to learn. It helps us appreciate everything as a gift. We didn't create it. We don't deserve it. It will not last, but while we breathe it in, we can enjoy it, and know that it is another moment of God, another moment of life. People who take this moment seriously take every moment seriously, and those are the people who are ready for heaven. (*Daily Meditations, Center for Action and Contemplation*, December 31, 2021)

Even heaven on earth? Can we even imagine it?

In the many blessed names of God, Amen.