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Passion for compassion  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
November 16, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, and Luke 21:5-19

Now - I know the rules. Nobody ever wants to talk about change. Well, don't blame me this week. It's not my fault that the lectionary has offered us two readings that are about change. All of this talk about a new heaven / new earth. Because surely a new heaven and a new earth would involve change.

Our text from Isaiah today is likely very familiar to all of us. But perhaps we usually hear it in the form of a song. Like the hymn that we sang at the opening of this service, "I See a New Heaven, I See a New Earth". There are many sung versions of that text. And the sung versions are all welcoming and friendly. When we read the actual text, however some of us might have had to scratch our heads a little bit.

The author speaks of a vision of a "new heaven and a new earth". On the one hand, the vision seems clear enough - people should be happy, live long lives, have children, have adequate food. Isaiah is talking about basic human needs. Of course, these days basic needs include things that Isaiah did not include. Like a decent phone and access to high-speed internet. But in any case, the vision in Isaiah points to a reality where people have their basic needs met. It's not hard to appreciate that vision.

On the other hand, I don't think I see how the vision in Isaiah will come about. In the text, God is going to create this new heaven and new earth and we will inhabit it. So far so good. But there is no mention of us humans working for this new heaven and new earth. Or even a footnote that we might have to smarten ourselves up a bit in order to fit in. Don't get me wrong - I like the vision - I'm just not sure how a new earth would be any better than the current one unless we humans get a make-over too. I think humanity would need to take a new attitude into a new earth or else the new earth would soon resemble the one we already have. We don't just need a planet-makeover, we also need a human-makeover. And Isaiah is strangely silent on that part of the project.

We get a somewhat different image of the future from our reading in Luke. To be

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honest, I am disturbed by that vision. Although we “will gain our souls” in the end, it sounds like we have to go through a lot of pain to get there. Luke’s Jesus talks about wars and rumours of wars, of being persecuted, of being hated, of being killed even. I don’t know about you, but none of those things are on my bucket list! And the vision begins with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. In those days, many Jewish people thought that the temple was actually the dwelling place of God, and therefore it’s existence was quite important. Imagine what the disciples felt when they heard Jesus’s prediction that the temple was to be destroyed.

And again, it is just not clear from the text how humans should react to this. What are we supposed to do? Should we be working for peace? Or should we try to increase global warfare just to get the whole mess over and done with as soon as possible? And that is not an idle question. Because many “Christian” and other groups around the world are working to increase global warfare based on the theory that global warfare is one step that will take us closer to the end times. But if the destruction of our planet is “progress”, how exactly are we supposed to relate to that.

Both Isaiah and Luke present us with an image of a new heaven and a new earth. But in the sense that those are places that we will escape to. But we are right here, right now. So I believe that our best option is to work to create that new heaven and new earth right here. Right now.

The question is not waiting for God to do this for us. The real question is whether or not we are willing to come into sync with the divine rhythm that is already in place in this new heaven and new earth. We actually affirm this every single week when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven”. We do not need an escape. We need a better reality right here. We need - what one artist calls - divine synchronization.

To be blunt - are we going to be given a new heaven and a new earth? Or are we given the opportunity and the resources to create them ourselves, with the help of the spirit?

This is not a new question. That question actually divided one of the early Christian communities.

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Reading from 2 Thessalonians, “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.”<sup>1</sup>

What is this text about? As we’ve discussed before, some people in the early Christian community were expecting Jesus to return soon. Soon as in we don’t need to buy more milk soon. So some members of the Christian community in Thessalonica had quit their jobs and were just sitting around waiting for Jesus to pop out of the clouds. Some people were so convinced that Christ was coming back soon that people quit their jobs and just sat around mooching off other people, waiting for the end days. And the author of 2 Thessalonians responds with a simple message. Do not expect God to do all the work - keep working yourself!

I hear the call to keep working as a call to work for this coming new heaven and new earth that Isaiah and Luke are talking about. Because perhaps the way that the earth will be transformed is by us humans actually rolling up our sleeves and working towards that transformation.

But still the question remains. What exactly are we supposed to do?

Spoiler alert. Maybe this new creation will not appear with thunderbolts, trumpets and fire. But instead with small, individual acts of harmony. Perhaps the remedy for humankind is simply the breaking through of compassion into our own hearts. Perhaps humans need to evolve a bit ourselves in order to inhabit this new heaven / new earth. Perhaps we need a passion for compassion.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13.

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A few years ago I attended a workshop on how the theory of evolution relates to Islam. The workshop was put on by an Islamic group here in Toronto. Sadly, I do not remember which group put this event on. But I do remember their view of evolution of the human species which I found fascinating. Their idea is that there are 4 stages in human evolution. In stage 1, there are no human beings on earth, just animals and plants. In stage 2, there are beings that look human, but they have human bodies and animal brains. They look human but they act like animals. In stage 3, the human brain evolves into a more rational brain. This theory is fairly consistent with scientific theories of evolution, so that was not much of a surprise.

Now here's the interesting part. According to this theory, we are Stage 3 humans. But as I said, in this system there are 4 stages of human evolution. So what - you might ask - is Stage 4? What is the next evolutionary step for humanity? What is this vision for the "new and improved human"? This particular Islamic vision for the next stage in human evolution is for human beings who live with compassion. Humans who actually get along with each other - without war - without hatred - without discrimination - without oppression. This is a vision of human beings who actually live out compassion for all.

So this Islamic theory says that we need passion for compassion.

Consider with me what it was that Jesus was passionate about. Think of the people that Jesus interacted with. Think of what Jesus worked towards. Did Jesus do anything in his ministry to increase his own wealth? No. Did Jesus try to convince people that he was right? Not really.

Consider the story about the person we call "the rich young ruler". A rich person comes to Jesus and asks what they must do to inherit the kingdom. And Jesus tells them to sell all their possession, give to the poor, and to then follow Jesus. The person just walks away, dejected. Did Jesus chase after the rich person to try to convince them to change their mind? No. Jesus just let the person go.

Did Jesus do anything to increase how many followers he had? No. In the gospels, Jesus called 12 disciples at the beginning of his ministry. And 3 years later, at the last supper, Jesus still had 12 disciples. Zero growth. Jesus did not seem to care about wealth,

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or fame, or power at all. Jesus never created an 8-step master plan to change the world.

Instead, Jesus simply loved the person who was right in front of him in that moment. So what was Jesus passionate about? Jesus had passion for compassion. That seems to be a real theme today.

And today, compassion seems to be in short supply. I could use many examples, but I'm still recovering from the recent elections in the US and in Canada. And it doesn't matter which side you are on. We all saw a great lack of compassion appearing in the rhetoric. We had to endure propaganda that can only be called a festival of hatred, fear, anger, bigotry, and small-mindedness. This fear and anger was not created by the election process. But the election process brought it more sharply into the light. But how much compassion did we see?

Jesus's passion for compassion is what we still need today. The new heaven and new earth - which we also call the kingdom of God - will come about when we share Jesus's passion for compassion. We need to embrace the attitude - and the actions - of deep compassion.

But I do not want to leave this message here. Simply saying that we should be more compassionate people may be absolutely correct. But if it was that simple, wouldn't we already be doing it? Maybe we want to be more compassionate people but we do not always recognize the opportunities to make that happen.

So I want to take a page out of Jesus's own ministry. Think about every story you know about Jesus healing someone. Is there anything you notice that is common to most - if not all - of those healing stories? Well, there are a few things really. But today I want to lift up the fact that all of the stories of Jesus healing someone were ... not planned.

In those stories, we are told that Jesus is heading somewhere, or leaving town, when Jesus is interrupted. Usually, a person stops Jesus - out of the blue. Maybe with a cry for help. With a touch of his garment. With a plea. By climbing a tree. None of these healings would have happened without interrupting Jesus and his plan for the day.

There are exactly zero healing stories in the gospels where Jesus tells the disciples, "tomorrow we are going to meet someone at 10 am at these GPS co-ordinates because they need healing." That never happens. Jesus never puts up a poster that says,

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“come right here every Wednesday at 7 pm” for healing. That never happens.

Jesus is instead busy with something already in mind, and an opportunity to heal someone appears - as an interruption to Jesus's day. And Jesus stops, engages with the person, and takes the opportunity that is right in front of him to do something miraculous.

Even for us, opportunities for compassion are often unscheduled. They just appear. And at that precise moment - we can choose to engage in the moment with the person right in front of us - or we can tell ourselves that we are too busy right now and move one.

Compassion is about making space for someone else's need, allowing the needs of another person to break into our agenda. And sometimes, that feels like an interruption. Most of us probably hate interruptions in general. But the spirit always appears as an interruption. How could it be otherwise?

We need to be open to the gift of interruptions in our lives. Because that may be the spirit breaking in. Presenting us with an opportunity to be compassionate.

And I cannot leave this message here either. Because - briefly - I just want to remind all of us that that other person who appears in our lives as an interruption and also an opportunity for compassion might in fact be ourselves. We need to be compassionate to ourselves too.

Please do not hear this reflection as an invitation to burn yourself out helping others. Jesus did not hesitate to spend time alone, away from his friends and other people when he needed to. Jesus took “mental health days” when he needed to. Our call to be people of compassion is not a call to ignore our own physical, mental, and spiritual needs. Compassion includes everybody. And everybody includes you. And me.

The Dalai Lama said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy yourself, practice compassion”.

The kingdom comes into being - not later - not somewhere else - but right here and right now when we allow ourselves to be interrupted by compassion. When we join in the divine synchronization. When we live into the Lord's Prayer.

We need passion for compassion.

*Amen.*