



“Moving Into the New Jerusalem”

*The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California*

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Rev. 21:1–6a*

We got the word recently that some friends of ours are moving to Haiti. One of them is the new U.S. Ambassador there, and the other is a college friend of Stephanie’s. They have two adorable daughters. One is thrilled with the move, and the other is not.

The news of our friends’ move was less of a surprise for Stephanie than it was for me. She is, after all, the daughter of a diplomat, and she and her family and their friends moved frequently and to unexpected places throughout her childhood. Moving was the norm for the Spencers and their friends. They looked upon each new assignment with great enthusiasm, the way we kids looked forward to field trips when we were in grade school. So normative was change for the Spencers and their friends that they worried about people who were not regularly offered opportunities to relocate.

Stephanie has moved 27 times in her life. She has lived in more foreign countries than I have visited. She likes to remind me that Castro Valley is the place where she has lived the longest. Last time I checked, she has no plans to move, which is a relief to me. Given how normative change is for Stephanie, I am always amazed that she has put up with me for over 17 years.

Stephanie was raised to love change, to seek change, and to make change happen if external forces weren’t creating enough change for her to feel “normal.”

Unlike Stephanie, I grew up in rural Iowa on a Century Farm owned by my paternal grandmother, and I lived in a culture where moving away from home was the spiritual equivalent of heresy. As a child, I never thought that I would live outside of the state of Iowa, or do anything other than farm like every generation before me back to Adam and Eve.

I was raised to love tradition, stability, and routine.

Somewhere between years four and five in our life together, Stephanie and I came to a deeper understanding—one might call it a “matrimonial truce”—about how we would

manage the differences in our upbringings and maintain a “new normal” in our life as a couple, which was and is a delicate balance between change and constancy.

I don’t remember the exact date when we came to this truce, but it was the fall of 1996, which was the first year that I was working at the UCC National Offices in Cleveland. I had just arrived home from my ninth business trip in 90 days. I was in a new job as an executive leadership recruitment and development officer for our 350+ UCC-related health and human service organizations in the United States. My boss thought that I needed to get out and meet our constituents. So I did.

During my orientation period, I flew to nine different cities, drove a new rental vehicle in every city, found my way to dozens of corporate offices where I met scores of executives and their staff members, and then—that particular night—I flew home after having my connecting flight delayed in Chicago and slogged my way through snow and ice in rush-hour traffic, only to discover that Stephanie had rearranged our living room furniture for the third time since we had moved to Cleveland.

I still remember the look on her face when I walked in the house—Stephanie was thrilled with the new room arrangement. She had been “stranded” in Cleveland this whole time that I was travelling, and found rearranging the furniture a familiar, comforting experience.

I didn’t find it comforting. I had a meltdown. It wasn’t that I didn’t like the way she arranged the furniture. I don’t even remember what the room looked like. I just remember that in that moment I couldn’t deal with one more thing being different.

Thankfully, Stephanie took mercy on me so that before I was finished with my meltdown, she had the living room put back the way it was before I left on my trip, and she promised to never again move the furniture without discussing her ideas with me beforehand.

II

I wonder, “With whom do you empathize in this scenario: Stephanie or me? How were you raised to cope with change? Were you raised to think of change as a friend or foe? Do you look forward to change or do you dread it? How have you coped with change in your life?”

How we were raised to frame and cope with change affects how we deal with everything from occasional surprises to major life changes, such as moving away from home, marriage and divorce, childbearing and child-raising, and empty nests. Our formation around change affects how we approach career opportunities; employment advancements; and corporate retrenchments, layoffs, and reorganizations. How we view change affects the way we approach the aging of our parents, personal health challenges, our own aging, geographic moves, the death of loved ones, and even the prospect of our own demise.

Learning about and coping with change occurs at every stage along life's way. For example, students in our confirmation class are dealing with a lot of changes this year. One change that 12 of the 15 share in common is that they have changed schools this fall. Most have changed schools because they have moved up from middle school or junior high to high school, but others have also changed schools by switching from public to private school, or because of major geographic moves. All of our students are learning to cope with increased amount of homework and expectations. They are learning to find and forge new friendships, and they are dealing with new and different social situations.

One of the ways that we minister with our young people at their various stages in life is to offer a safe place where they can talk about these challenges, discover that others are experiencing similar challenges, share and develop stronger coping skills, and forge mutually supportive relationships where success is not dependent solely upon grades, talent, or popularity, but, moreover, on God's grace and mutual concern.

For our youth, most of the challenges that they face at this juncture in life seem to us adults as mostly positive. They are the kinds of challenges that help our young people develop the strengths and competence needed to become healthy, mature, and resilient adults.

The challenges that we face as we age, by contrast, particularly as we move deeper into adulthood, don't always seem so positive or constructive. In fact, many seem largely about loss. So many of us come to associate change with loss, and we begin to dread it, and we find ourselves experiencing meltdowns when we reach the kind "tipping point" that I did on that fateful day back in Cleveland when I arrived home to discover that even the living room arrangement had changed.

Most changes, regardless of whether we notice them or not, bear both negative and positive potential. Some changes, like the death of a loved one, are highly weighted toward the negative. If we have been raised to view change as an enemy, or if most of the changes that we've experienced in more recent years seem negative, then we may have an even harder time with change as we age and our resilience may wane.

The death of a loved one, particularly an immediate family member, can be one of the most difficult changes that we ever have to deal with in our lives—partly because their loss triggers so many other changes in our lives, such as a shift in personal identity, the challenge to learn new tasks that our loved one once handled, and the reminder of our own mortality.

Other challenges that some of us face in the wake of a loved one's death may include the following: changes in family finances; the press to reconsider where we live and whether or not to relocate; the shift from always having lived with others to living alone for the first time in our lives; changes in our social calendars, and more. You who have lost loved ones, particularly in recent months, you fill in the blank. You know better than I do what changes have been the most difficult to absorb. You know what day and

which event or events occasioned a meltdown for you, which is a normal part of the grieving process. And you know better than the rest of us just how hard it is to move through the Valley of the Shadow of Death that the psalmist described in Ps. 23 to that new place that John described metaphorically as “The New Jerusalem,” in Revelation 21:1–6a.

III

Change is hard. Moving from death to new life isn't easy. The loss of a loved one can be one of the most difficult challenges that we must absorb in our lives. That's why passages like Revelation 21, and the wisdom that John imparts, can be such a help to us. Listen again to John's words of wisdom and his vision of the New Jerusalem:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

No doubt this passage is a familiar one to those of us who are veterans of the funeral circuit. We've heard it many times. Perhaps even more of us have heard this passage recited in popular culture and used erroneously to suggest that the New Jerusalem is somewhere in the great “out there.”

If that's the case for you, if you have learned to associate the New Jerusalem with pie-in-the-sky religion, then I have some news for you—good news—and that good news is that the real estate that John is describing is not way out there, but right here on earth. The real estate that John is talking about is not for sale. It's free. In fact, we don't even have to pack our bags to get there. All we have to do is open up our hearts and receive God's healing presence in our lives.

The New Jerusalem that John described is one that descends to earth. It isn't a city in some proto-episode of Star Trek, where the citizens are beamed up to some extraterrestrial place. No. John envisioned heaven coming on earth. He imagined God taking up residence with us in whatever state and place that we find ourselves. John foresaw a city where suffering and sorrow had ended, and even death itself had died—not in the next life, but in this life, right here, right now.

This is good news. It is especially good news for those of us who are tired of change, particularly negative change, and who are resistant to packing our bags and moving to yet one more new place.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: the New Jerusalem is coming right here, right now. The New Jerusalem is wherever hearts are open to the living, loving God who fills the wounds of our hearts with healing balm, assuages our sorrow, and accompanies us on the journey through death to life. Believe the good news of the gospel, for these words are trustworthy and true. Amen.