

Next Steps

Next 45 Series, January 9-10, 2021 | Revelation 21:22-27

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THE WORLD AROUND US CHANGED IN 2020.

HBO Max became a big thing suddenly.

HBO Max is a video streaming service.

It had been struggling to get people to sign up.

Then in December, Warner Brothers announced that they would release *Wonder Woman 84* on HBO Max on Christmas Day, the same day that it debuted in theaters. They will release all of their films on HBO Max in 2021. That drove subscriptions to HBO Max up wildly.

Their move made movie theaters furious, but it reflects reality. Not only are people reluctant to go to movie theaters during the COVID era, but we like being able to stream movies in the comfort of our own homes when we want to.

Carvana made buying a car more like buying a book.

Way back when, Amazon made us comfortable with the concept of buying books online.

There were many things, though, that we were reluctant to buy online. That began to change in 2020 as we became less comfortable shopping in person.

Carvana made it easy to find a car online, examine that car from every angle, buy it, and have it delivered to you.

Enough people liked the idea that their stock price rose nearly 250% in 2020.

Like it or not, buying more things from home online seems to be here to stay.

And **Peloton** brought fitness home as well.

Before 2020, many of us went to gyms to work out.

But then gyms closed for long periods of time, and people wanted to keep working out.

Even after gyms opened again, many of us wanted to continue working out at home.

Peloton made it possible to work out and go to a fitness class right from home.

Their stock went up by 500% in 2020.

I'm not telling you any of these things because I want you to subscribe to HBO Max, buy a car from Carvana, or purchase Peloton equipment. These three stories remind us that the world around us changed in 2020.

How did your world change in 2020?

Did you find yourself working from home? Many of us did, we liked it, and we plan to do more of it even after the pandemic is over.

Did you invest in your home? As we spent more time at home, we invested in home offices, spruced up some old spaces, and made home improvements.

Did you up your video conferencing game? 2020 was the year I learned about ring lights. And it was the year I vowed I would never own a ring light. And it was the year I bought a ring light.

In 2020 we experienced 10 years' worth of change in a matter of months. The Wall Street Journal proclaimed, "COVID has acted like a time machine: it brought 2030 to 2020."¹

2020 stretched the fabric of human relationships.

We humans are inherently social creatures.

Think of us as being linked to each other by ties that are like the threads in a piece of fabric.

But that fabric has been pulled and stretched by being at home, by mental-health issues, by social tensions, by fear, and by simply being apart.

The things we normally do to keep our social fabric strong have been more difficult.

What does the Bible say about our connections with one another?

WE WERE CREATED FOR COMMUNITY.

God's nature includes community.

We learn a great deal about God in Genesis chapter 1. We learn who God was in the beginning and before the beginning.

Genesis 1:1-3: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

We see three distinct and important things being said here. First, God the Father was in the beginning; God created the heavens and the earth.

Second, when creation happened, the Holy Spirit was hovering over the face of the waters. To hover in this case means to be above, to soar across, to tremble with joy and delight.

Third, God created by speaking. God used words, language, and communication to express the plan and pattern from which creation sprang into being. That takes us to the Gospel of John, chapter 1 where we learn more about the heart and identity of God in the beginning.

John 1:1-3 reads: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

The Word of God, of course, is Jesus. The Word of God is the plan and pattern from which creation sprang into being.

Consequently, we have God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit right there in the beginning.

We are reminded that in the beginning, before the beginning, and always, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: One God in three persons.

The Father always has the Son and the Spirit. The Son always has the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit always has the Father and the Son. They always have each other and act together.

¹ https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-propelled-businesses-into-the-future-ready-or-not-11608958806?st=1pljz7f7ew53x13&reflink=article_email_share

Community is right there at the heart of God. God's identity includes community.

God's image is inside of us.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created us in his image:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

That doesn't mean that God created us to look like him.

Nor does it mean that we have all of God's attributes. (We aren't all-knowing or all-powerful.)

To be made in God's image means we were created to be like God in some ways.

It turns out that just as community is at the heart of God, community is in our nature.

God created us to need community.

We find this out in the second chapter of Genesis, right after we were created.

Genesis 2:18 says: *Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."*

When there was only one human being, a man, God said that this was not good.

Why? Because we humans weren't created to be alone. We were created to be in community.

We were all created for community.

A 2020 study by Barna Research Group called *Restoring Relationships* explored just how important relationships are to us and where our relationships stood *before COVID hit*.

First of all, we were struggling. More than half of us (Christian and non-Christian alike) report struggling with some kind of relationship issue. (pp. 12-13)

Roughly 40% of us are struggling with anxiety or depression. At any given point, roughly one-third of us feel lonely. (p. 36)

And anytime we experience other significant problems in life, we get more anxious, more depressed, and lonelier. (p. 37-35)

We put a good face on life sometimes. We say that we're doing well even when we aren't. We try to power through life all on our own. This research reminds us that we need each other.

You might think that what I'm saying applies only or mainly to extraverts.

Extraverts seem to need time with other people in order to be happy and satisfied.

On the other hand, you'll hear some people say that all they need to be happy is a cup of coffee, a comfortable place to sit, and a good book to read. You might think that describes introverts and that this statement means that some people don't need people.

The Bible teaches us otherwise. The Bible teaches us that we all need other people.

Research confirms what the Bible teaches about community.

Susan Cain wrote a book about introversion called *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*. In it she reminds us that introverts can be creative, lead selflessly, and contribute profound ideas. They are normal, good, powerful, and valuable people. Introverts just require less stimulation than extraverts to be fulfilled.² But can introverts exist in a vacuum? No! Introverts need people just as much as extraverts. We all need people, because we were created for community.

WE WERE **REDEEMED** FOR COMMUNITY.

Sin tore the fabric of community.

I'm going to spend less time here, because this territory may be more familiar and intuitive.

In Genesis chapter 3, the Bible tells us that the first humans sinned or disobeyed God.

As soon as they did, the Bible says that their eyes were opened, they realized that they were naked, and made coverings for themselves. Shame entered the world and began to break down the community that God created us to enjoy.

Genesis 3:8-13: *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

Did you see the relational consequences? Human beings were cut off from God; we were guilty and ashamed, so we hid from him.

We were cut off from one another.

All of the pain that the world has suffered since then is really just working out the ways that we're cut off from, alienated from, and in conflict with God and the people around us.

Jesus tore down walls that we built.

Ephesians 2:19-22: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

When Jesus died, he paid the price for our sins. When we accept the price that Jesus paid for our sins, our guilt is gone, and the penalties and consequences begin to go away as well.

Ephesians 2:19-22 tells us that sin made us strangers and aliens to each other. It's like we built walls between us and others.

Jesus tore those walls down. There is now no wall between us and God, and there is now no wall between us and other followers of Jesus.

² <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-power-of-introverts/>

Jesus redeemed us into a community.

John 1:12-13: *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

That means that if we're followers of Jesus, we are family.

If we're followers of Jesus, we are all children of God.

If we all have the same Father, then we are brothers and sisters, all part of one family.

Barna research on the COVID era tells us that those walls are going back up right now.

A study they did in September indicates that 22% of us have stopped doing anything with our faith. In other words, something about COVID has driven us away from each other.³

A study they did back in May indicated that loneliness was rampant. At least 50% of us feel lonely right now.⁴

Those dividing walls are going back up. As we said earlier, our social fabric is being stretched.

We can't really love God if we can't love one another.

Building community—you could call it loving each other—is ESSENTIAL for followers of Jesus.

1 John 4:20 confronts us about our tendency to separate loving one another from loving God: *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*

We are redeemed from separateness into community.

WE ARE DESTINED FOR COMMUNITY.

Revelation 21:22-23 shows us that we will live in community with God.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

In these verses, John was recording a vision given to him by an angel.

The big battles were all over. Old Heaven and Old Earth have already dissolved away, and God has made all things new. This is eternity, the New Creation. Here John is specifically describing what the New Jerusalem will be like.

Central to his picture is that we will live forever in full communion with God.

There is no Temple in the New Jerusalem. The function of the old Temple was to be a meeting place between God and humans. There is no need for a place for God to meet with humans anymore, because God is always with us in a face-to-face kind of way like we saw in Genesis.

There is no specific sun, moon, or stars. The glory of God shines and gives light everywhere.

³ https://careynieuwhof.com/new-exodus-4-reasons-so-many-people-including-christians-have-suddenly-left-the-church/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=New+Exodus%3F+4+Reasons+So+Many+People+%28Including+Christians%29+Have+Suddenly+Left+the+Church&utm_campaign=12%2F28+Part+5+CLT+%2B+new+post+from+Carey

⁴ <https://www.barna.com/research/year-in-review-2020/>

There will be no night—no shadows, no threats, and no time of day that is dangerous or dark. All that darkness is gone; all evil is gone; everyone and everything is secure.

Revelation 21:24-26 shows us that we will live in a large, complex community.

By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

Earlier in Revelation 21 we see the city of New Jerusalem described.

Here in verses 24-26 we discover that the city of New Jerusalem is the center of the New Earth and that there is population outside of New Jerusalem.

The light of God will radiate from New Jerusalem and light the whole world. Literally, there will be no night. But further, it means that God's way will be the only way in the New Creation.

Verse 24 says that the nations of New Earth will "walk" by its light. Here "walk" means more than to simply take a stroll. It means to behave in a certain way. The word appears in **1 Corinthians 7:17** that says,

*Only let each person **lead the life** that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.*

It's the same word. The nations will order their lives around the ways of New Jerusalem.

Since there is no longer any sin or any reason to fear, there is nothing from which we must protect ourselves. City gates can be closed to protect the residents of a city, but there will be no need to protect ourselves from one another in this new society.

There are inhabitants of New Earth living outside of New Jerusalem. They will live in nations and have kings or rulers.

The nations will bring their glory and honor. Of course, these are acts of worship directed toward God. Glory and honor also mean their most valuable things, the things that give them pride, the things that are esteemed by others. People in the New Creation will produce things and do business. They'll bring the best of it to New Jerusalem as an offering to God.

New Jerusalem itself will be a vast, bustling, active, creative city.

And it will be the capital—the economic, cultural, and spiritual hub—of New Earth.

Revelation 21:27 shows us that we will finally manifest the image of God.

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

We were created in the image of God, with community at our heart.

In the end, we will live in perfect community with God and with each other.

We will finally manifest the image of God.

We will never leave community.

I have several friends who aspire to living farther and farther away from town.

They would love to own large houses on large pieces of property. They would love not to see another living person outside of their families on most days.

If that's what you long for in life, I have bad news for you. We were created for community, we are redeemed for community, and we are destined for community. We will never leave community! Community is central to God's plan for us!

We may have started history as small families living in a garden, but we will end history as residents of a vast, complex, interrelated society.

This is a critically important doctrine for us to understand because it has important implications for our life together as followers of Jesus and for our plans for our church!

WE WILL TAKE THE **NEXT STEPS** TOWARD COMMUNITY.

In 2021 we will be looking back at our first 45 years and thinking about our "Next 45" years.

That's the whole idea behind this sermon series.

This series gives me a chance to talk about how we need to prepare for the future.

The great thing is that each thing we need to do as we point ourselves toward that future is grounded securely in who we've been in the past.

That starts with community! We have always been a church that values and is grounded in community.

This past summer, I talked with many you who attend. One of the questions I asked frequently was, "What drew you to Valley in the first place?" Many people said, "The people at Valley drew me in, made me feel welcome, and gave me a place to belong." There are stories of families taking newcomers out to lunch after their first time attending. That's why they stayed!

As a church, community defined us in the beginning and over the years.

As we continue to navigate this COVID era, community is what must define us.

As we plot our way into the Next 45, community must remain a defining characteristic.

We will take the Next Steps toward community as a church as we start our Next 45 years.

But we are left with some important questions to wrestle with as individuals right now.

1. Who will you connect with?

I wish I could make this easy for you and tell you, "Here are ten opportunities I've giving you to connect with other people right now. Pick one. It'll make you feel better."

The truth of the matter is that we've given you lots of those opportunities in the past.

I hope to give you more of those opportunities over time.

But community can't just be boiled down to a church program, even a really good one.

If we are going to build genuine community, particularly during the COVID era, it is only going to be because you decided to do something to build community with someone.

I would love to tell you that I'm going to take your loneliness away. But what I'm really telling you is that people around you are lonely; please go and do something about it.

2. What tools will you use?

When the COVID era began, we worked very hard to use new digital tools to make community possible, even when we couldn't be together as often or as transparently face to face.

Those tools made a big impact!

I played the board game "Ticket to Ride" online with friends who are 1,000 miles away recently. (Community comes in all kinds of forms.)

Digital tools are critical to reaching new people, and they are going to be part of our toolkit from this point forward.

However, there are limits to what digital tools can do for us.

That's okay. There are lots of other tools we can use to build community.

Telephones, texting, and handwritten notes build community.

Standing outside someone else's window to talk, even if the time is short because of the cold, can make a very big difference.

Firepits can be great tools for bringing people together in safe ways.

What tools can you dream up to build community right now?

3. When will you take the next step?

As we start our Next 45 as a church, I'm promising you that I will do my part.

Today I'm asking you to do your part.

I'm asking you to make a conscious decision to knit together the fabric of relationships that the COVID era has stretched and frayed. I'm asking you to do something concrete to get to know someone else and to welcome them into your life as a brother, a sister, and friend.

4. Where will you start?

Will you start with prayer?

This week we will launch 21 Days of Prayer, as we start 2021.

This is an excellent opportunity for you to build the habit of prayer and spending time with God daily, if you've never started that habit.

It's also an excellent opportunity for you to pray together with the rest of us in a focused way for our church and for what God might do in and through our church in the future.

Specifically, this week we will be praying about how God wants us to take the next steps in building the kinds of community that he created us to enjoy.

Will you start building community by praying together with the people in this church?