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Sermon
December 29, 2013
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“A New Life for a New Year”

Scripture Text: 2 Corinthians 5:13-17

Dear people of God, this week we take down the old calendar and put up the new one. For many of us, we receive a new checkbook from our bank, new insurance policies, and a new rental lease or mortgage. We begin a new year with new resolutions and a clean, fresh start with new hopes and new goals. And millions of people will greet 2014 wishing to start the year with new lives, new attitudes, and new relationships.

On Tuesday night at midnight when we toast with our spouses and friends, “Happy New Year,” what we are wishing for them is something exciting and joyous, something that will truly bring happiness into their lives. And that is what they will be wishing for us also as they clink our champagne glasses.

The fact is, however, that for the vast majority of us, 2014 promises very little of the new, but much of the same old same old. The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes will prove to be prophetic once again

when he says, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Many will adopt the cynical beatitude of our times, “Blessed are you who expect nothing, for you shall not be disappointed.”

I don't often watch evangelistic television programs, but I was watching one the other day. A woman was giving her testimony to a church filled with parishioners, telling them of the remarkable experience of God that had turned her life around. The videographer was panning the audience every so often as she was speaking, and I don't know if he was aware of what he was showing, but it seemed to me that even in this southern evangelical megachurch, many of the faces listening to the woman seemed to be saying as plainly as though they were shouting it, “New life? What are you talking about? It's impossible. Things like that don't happen in a world like ours. Maybe they happened in biblical times, but they don't happen today. You must be mistaken, lady. I want to see you in a year and see if you're still so bubbly and enthusiastic about this so-called change in your life.” Yes, it seems that even many evangelicals are full of doubt about being born again with its attendant radical change in attitude and way of life.

In spite of the hilarity and abandon which has become typical of

America's welcoming of the new year, few believe that anything really new will come about. Few are convinced that there will be any actual change in their everyday situation. Life as they know it will go on as usual. They will work at the same old tedious job, live in the same old boring house, do the same old dreary chores, pay the same old tiresome taxes--only they will be higher than last year--and they will seek the same kind of amusement and entertainment, which satisfies them for a few hours, but then they will be thrust back into the doldrums of their same old lackluster life.

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning? Well, there's some good news in all of this.

Historically, it was in just this kind of atmosphere that the movement that came to be known as Christianity began. It wasn't just the writer of Ecclesiastes who said that there's really nothing new under the sun. The ancient Greek philosophers were teaching the same thing. They believed that everything comes and goes in cycles. Time and history slowly turn again and again to repeat identical facts as the years and ages pass. It came to be known as the concept of eternal return or eternal recurrence. The Roman god of the new year, Janus (from whose name

January comes) was able to look both ways at once as he stood on the threshold of time. But even Janus did not expect to see anything new nor was he able to help Roman civilization produce anything essentially new. The idea of creativeness in history, of upward progress, was something of which the ancient world was stoically unaware.

By the time of Jesus, this gloomy attitude of the Greeks and Romans had also crept into the thought of the ancient Hebrews. Many of them really were not expecting a coming Messiah who would make all things new for them. One religious leader among the Pharisees, Nicodemus, shared that general cynical view, despite the teaching of his religion. Nicodemus was astounded when Jesus of Nazareth talked about a person being able to be born, not “again,” but “from above.” The translators of the New Revised Standard Version that we use in this chapel got it right. Jesus does not say “born again,” but “born from above.” Nicodemus is the one who is confused, asking if it’s possible for someone to “enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born” (John 3:4). That’s where the evangelicals and fundamentalists get the idea of being “born again.” But that’s not what Jesus is talking about. And that’s not what the apostle Paul is talking about in our Sermon

Lesson this morning. Nevertheless, despite his confusion Nicodemus comes to experience what Jesus means. We meet him again near the end of John's Gospel when he assists his fellow Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea, taking down the corpse of Jesus from the cross and preparing it for burial. If you had told Nicodemus at the beginning of that year that he would be doing such a thing, he would have laughed in your face. Jesus was able to do a miraculous thing in his life, changing the legalistic Pharisee and devout upholder of the traditions of Judaism into a follower.

There were others who, upon first meeting Jesus, were cynical about his teachings that they could become new persons. The tax collector, Zacchaeus, a vertically challenged man who had probably long ago decided that not much change could be made in him, was remade one day when Jesus dined with him. If you had told him on the first of that year that a wandering peasant preacher would change his crooked ways and cynical outlook on life so that he would give away half his substantial possessions to the poor and return fourfold to anyone whom he had defrauded (fourfold!), he probably would have laughed at you all the way to the bank.

A tough-minded Samaritan woman, divorced many times, met

Jesus at a well one day and discovers not only a new religion that will turn her life around, but that she could truly have a new start in life with the new power that he gave to her. If you were to meet her at the beginning of the year and told her that this would happen, she would have dismissed you as a fool and wandered back into her tent with lover number six.

Many hundreds were at first skeptical of Jesus until they met him and he was able to transform them, curing them of blindness and being deaf and dumb, of leprosy and other dreaded diseases, of paralysis and self-defeating distrust and anxiety. Jesus even raised the dead. Who would have believed that?

But perhaps Christ's greatest miracle was the extreme makeover of Saul of Tarsus. The most vicious and hateful persecutor of Christians, the most zealous believer and evangelist of legalistic Judaism, was transformed so that he would become the greatest Christian who would ever live. In his own words, as the apostle Paul, he said, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Again, God bless the translators of the New Revised Standard Version. They got it right again

with this verse. The older translations tended to say, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,” not “there is a new creation.” I think the change is significant. And it provides the key to how we can begin the year with a new start.

How can there be a new creation beginning on January 1, 2014? Obviously the world itself is not going to change. You’re still going to look the same. You’re still going to live in the same home. You’re still going to have the same job. Your financial situation will remain the same. What’s going to be different? The only thing that can be different is your perspective. That’s the only way that there can be a new creation. You must look at the world differently. You must look at the world with new eyes, with the eyes of Nicodemus, the eyes of Zacchaeus, the eyes of the Samaritan woman at the well, the eyes of the apostle Paul. Christ didn’t change anything about them physically. But he gave them something more valuable, much more valuable. He gave them new eyes to see so that the world indeed was transformed for them.

A new perspective! That’s what each of us needs for the new year. A new perspective on life is more powerful than any physical change that can happen to us.

It was this new perspective that others saw in Christians that changed the Western world. As more and more persons converted to Christianity in the first few centuries after Christ, a new force for good was unleashed in world history. Converted slaveholders began to free their slaves without requiring compensation, something unheard of in the Roman Empire. Roman soldiers threw down their arms and quit the military because they believed that serving Christ meant that they could not serve Caesar. The poor and social outcasts in the Empire packed secret dwellings and caves to listen to stories about this Jewish preacher and miracle worker, Jesus, and how God raised him from the dead. The Christian movement rose from Roman catacombs and the Colosseum of martyrs to claim all of Western culture.

Here were persons who cast off their cynical view that nothing really changes, for they had experienced something different. They had experienced real change in their lives. They boldly declared that everything changes once God gets hold of it. They were those who came to believe that the God of Jesus Christ is working out a purpose in the world through ordinary Christians who have been reborn with a heavenly vision, a vision of the kingdom of heaven that allows them to see the

world differently, to see the world as the arena of Christ's redemption. Where ancient civilizations had assumed that the only way to get things done was through power and coercive means, Christians began to teach a different perspective where lives would be changed peacefully through transformation by Christ.

There's a story about Charles Darwin, one of the most falsely maligned persons in history. In 1833, he visited Tierra del Fuego, an archipelago off the southernmost tip of South America. He found the inhabitants of that land bestial and crude, almost beyond description. Darwin revisited the islands 36 years later and discovered these same people with an entirely new culture. They were gentle, literate, and hospitable. What had made the difference? They had been converted to Christianity. Darwin then sent 25 pounds to the London Missionary Society and asked that he might be enrolled as an honorary member. You mean that Charles Darwin, that no good atheist who devoted his life to destroying the truthfulness of the Bible with that demonic idea of evolution that rose straight out of the pit of hell itself? Yes, that Charles Darwin who was neither of those things. But that's a sermon for Evolution Sunday in February. What changed the lives of the residents of Tierra del

Fuego was their being transformed by a power named Christianity.

Many today familiar with those stories of conversion of pagan peoples and nations wonder if that same power is available today. You might wonder if such power to transform is available in your own life. I can assure you that it is.

Do you want to start off the new year living with that kind of transformative power? You can do it. But you must have the right perspective. You must be born from above. You must have a perspective on life that comes from Christ. You must see people and problems and possibilities as Christ sees them. That might mean that you do more than just come to church once a week for an hour. You might need to join our Bible Study. We're starting a new topic in January. Come and see me after the service and tell me what you would like to study to help you to experience that kind of transformative power in your life. It's not going to happen automatically. You're not going to wake up on January 1 and all of a sudden see the world differently. It doesn't work that way. You must invest the time to bring about that change. You must engage in daily prayer, Bible reading, and involve yourself in the church's ministries and missions.

Being in Christ means that you live by his grace, trusting him, believing in him, and finding security and power in him. You must believe that he has forgiven all your sins and has taken away your guilt. You must believe that God loves and accepts you as you are right now. But you must also believe that God doesn't want you to stay just the way you are. For you can become so much more.

Commit in this new year to be that person who is so much more. You can do it because "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Amen.