

Resolution: Begin Anew

Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-21; Hebrews 10:10-23; 2 Corinthians 5:17

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

“50 Ways to Improve Your Life in [the new year]” – that was the cover headline I saw on one magazine’s year-end issue. The promo blurb for those “50 Ways to Improve Your Life” declares, “The best thing about a new year is that you can start it with a clean slate.” You can start a new year with a clean slate – how could that be? How could the turn of a page on a calendar confer such a privilege – the privilege of having a “clean slate,” of not having the baggage of bad choices and bad memories weighing us down? What is it about going from writing “2012” instead of “2011” – you are doing that, aren’t you? – what is it about writing “2012” instead of “2011” that makes us believe that something really has changed? That something really is new? That there are things possible today that were not possible just a week or so ago?

A clean slate, an opportunity to make a fresh start of our lives – people have been yearning for that ever since we humans started to walk on two legs. The Bible speaks to this yearning – sometimes with despair, sometimes with hope. For example, we have these discouraging words from the writer of Ecclesiastes:

All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. . . . all is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.ⁱ

Phew! It is hard to imagine why that fellow would ever bother to get out of bed! From the writer of Lamentations, we hear this mournful cry:

The elders . . . sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth. The young girls . . . have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers . . . as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers’ breast.ⁱⁱ

Those words could have been written today. Weeping, mourning, babies dying even as their mothers hold them close – our world still knows such grief. While you and I are here worshiping together, millions of people are facing starvation, disease, and rape, are being tortured, murdered, and driven out of their homes. That is the situation, today, in Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, the Republic of Congo and far too many other places on our globe. Before today is over, millions of people will spend their eyes weeping, their stomachs churning because of the hate and devastation they must endure. Again, we wonder how anyone can go on when that is their experience of life. How could anyone in the midst of such havoc and ruination find any reason for hope?

The writer of Lamentations had himself lived through the invasion and demolition of his home city. Everyone who was healthy and able had been deported, leaving behind only the very old and very young, the widows and orphans, the vulnerable, the weak. The writer declared, “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.” But listen to what that writer also has to say: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morningⁱⁱⁱ” Somehow, some way, the writer of Lamentations was able to find hope in a situation that appeared devoid of any basis for hope.

That is what we need, is it not – a way to find hope in a situation that appears devoid of any basis for hope? Perhaps it is a medical condition, the loss of a job, a difficult relationship, a loved one who is headed for trouble and whom we cannot seem to reach. Perhaps it is our own inability to find the strength and peace that we long to have. Perhaps it is that, like the apostle Paul, we bemoan the fact that, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”^{iv} You and I yearn for 2012 to give us a “clean slate,” so that we will no longer have the baggage of last year’s bad choices and bad memories weighing us down. We want 2012 to give us hope for those situations that 2011 told us are devoid of hope. Can the turn of a page on a calendar do that for us? Can 2012 provide us that hope? Or, was the writer of Ecclesiastes correct when he said, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun”?

That over-and-over-again repetition of what has been being what will be – we also find that addressed in our Second Lesson for this morning, from the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews. As we read that lesson, watch for the phrases “day after day” and “again and again” – then watch for what comes next.

It is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” he also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

“It is finished.”^v According to the Gospel of John, those were Jesus’ final words before his death. The final message Jesus gave to this world before his death on a cross was to tell us that his work here was done. What work was that? The work of salvation. The work of setting the world free from the power of sin and death. The work of making it possible for you and me to put our past behind us and experience a completely new form of life. “It is finished,” Jesus declared. Generations before, the Psalmist had prayed, “Create in my a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me”^{vi} – and in his final moment on the cross, Jesus, the Son of the Living God, said, “Yes; that is what I have done. You may now enjoy a clean heart and begin living with a new and right spirit within you.” So, why do you and I keep waiting for our clean heart, for our new and right spirit? Why do we keep looking for the turn of a page on a calendar, or a new job, or a new relationship, or some other thing to give us a fresh start, when Jesus has already finished the job?

Why, indeed. The writer of Hebrews is trying to end that need in us, that need we have to look in all the wrong places for what God has already provided. He is trying to explain to us just what Jesus meant when he said, “It is finished.” Just what it means for you and me that God has completely and finally answered our prayer that we might have a clean heart, that we might be enlivened by a new and right spirit dwelling within us. “It is finished.” In one act – in one final act of obedience and sacrifice on the cross – Jesus made it possible for you and me to be free. Made it possible for you and me to toss away the baggage of bad choices and bad memories that constantly

weigh us down, that prevent us from enjoying the life God intended us to lead. So long as you and I drag that baggage along with us from one day into the next, we cannot move forward. The new and right spirit God is offering us cannot do its job: the job of transforming us into the image of Christ. Nothing you and I might do or avoid doing can ever lift that burden from us, but through the grace of God, we do not have to. “It is finished.” God has kept his promise to “remember [our] sins and [our] lawless deeds no more.” The question is, are we able to trust in that promise and let our burden go?

We humans tend to forget what we should remember and remember what we should forget.^{vii} We tend to forget what the life and work of Jesus tell us about the nature of God. We tend to forget all the evidence we have of God’s power, of God’s faithfulness, and of God’s constant, extravagant love. And while we are forgetting what we should remember, we are remembering what we should forget. We play and replay in our minds a sort of videotape of our own failures and the shortcomings of strangers, our relatives, and our friends. We cling to the life we experienced yesterday, failing to embrace or even recognize the new life that God is offering us today. What if we stopped doing that? What if you and I started using our memories as God had in mind? What if we started learning the lessons that the past has to teach us, but held ourselves fully open to finding out where God is now calling us to go? How would that change our lives – how might that change the world?

To find out, we would have to take the advice we find there in our Second Lesson. We would have to accept as true that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.” We would have to believe that God has forgiven us – that he no longer remembers our sins and our lawless deeds and is ready to lift them off our backs and toss them out of our way. We would have to approach each day “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” that in Christ our lives have been made new – that “everything old has passed away . . . everything has become new.”^{viii} We would have to affirm these realities not only for ourselves, but for all the rest of God’s children, as well, because by God’s will “it is finished.” For all of time and for all people, God has granted us pardon and mercy, and God implores us to have confidence that this is true. For you and me to embrace our calling and our lives as people who know God’s love and who eagerly share that love with one and all. If you and I did that – if we fully embraced the new life we have in Christ – it would change our lives. And, through us, God would change the world.

“50 Ways to Improve Your Life in 2012”? How about just one way – the way that God offers? God offers you and me the ability to begin anew, to be transformed into the image of Christ.^{ix} We do not have to wait for a new year, or anything else, to take advantage of this offer. It is God’s gift to us every day, every hour, every instant of our lives. You and I can have a clean slate every day of every year, because God is the God of mercy and love. God is the God of creation, of renewal, and growth. By forgiving our past and granting us his love, God has made it possible for you and me to begin our lives anew, over and over again.

God invites us to let go of whatever shadows and curses we might have known and grab hold of the light and grace he provides for us today. God offers us a way to discover that his steadfast love “never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; [but] are new every morning . . .”^x For us to see the “new and living way” that Christ has thrown open for us. For us to begin our lives anew by believing and trusting and basing our lives upon the good news made reality in Christ: We do not need to remember the former things, or consider the things of old, because God is about to do a new thing. Even now it is springing forth.^{xi} May we all perceive it. Amen.

ⁱ Ecclesiastes 1:8-11, 14-15

ⁱⁱ Lamentations 1:10-12

ⁱⁱⁱ Lamentations 3:19-23

^{iv} Romans 7:18-21

^v John 19:30

^{vi} Psalm 51:10

^{vii} John N. Oswalt, *The God of Newness*, Calvin Theological Journal 39 (2004) p. 387

viii 2 Corinthians 5:17

ix See John H. Leith, Basic Christian Doctrine, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, p. 190

x Lamentations 3:19-23

xi Isaiah 43:18-19