

Sermon Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-9

Well, I want to congratulate everyone here today, and not everyone is here today, but all of you who are here, you have made it through Christmas. You have made it another Christmas. All the activities and class parties and meetings with relatives and meetings with friends and family and exchange of gifts and then exchanging gifts that you didn't want, those sorts of things, you've made it through another Christmas. Now, we face tonight, New Year's Eve. I have the question for you; can a New Year really, really be new?

The Scripture that you heard Kit read from Ecclesiastes, a very cynical Scripture saying there is nothing new under the sun, a man works and he toils, he grows older, he dies, and that's it, and there's nothing new, nothing new. Then we hear from the New Testament that all things are new and that we are a new creation in Christ. How new your New Year can be partially depends upon you and your attitude, which you will adopt – the Ecclesiastes attitude that nothing ever changes and you will not change, and the world will not change, or the idea that God who created all there is can indeed recreate and create in us a new heart, a new zest for life, a new hope, a new ability to love and to care and to forgive and to heal and to grow. From faith to deeper faith, from love to deeper love, from hope to deeper, even eternal hope.

You know, if you have an attitude that is only focused on the negative then I do not believe you can become very new no matter how many New Years you flip the calendar pages on. Some people see only the negative.

One Greenwood lady, raise your hand after the story if it was you, one Greenwood lady tells how after years of persuading her mother to finally have that cataract surgery, she got her mother to have the surgery. It was not as big a deal as she thought, and she returned home from the hospital. She sat her mother down in front of a picture window overlooking Lake Greenwood, and the daughter, with a smile on her face, and anticipation, said, "Mom, do you notice any difference in the view?" The mother said, "I certainly do. Don't you ever dust?"

If you have a negative attitude and that's what you look for, that's what you'll see. No matter how many New Years you flip in the January of New Year, you may not become all that new.

Modern psychology has proven it largely true that what you look for is pretty much what you find. If you think the New Year will be filled with arguments and disappointments and despair, you are your own prophet. It is within your power to make sure that your new year will be filled with arguments, disappointments, and despair. You can make that come to pass. Studies by psychologists have confirmed that people who see themselves as winners even in difficult times, those people who can overcome even difficult times, these people who expect the future to be better than the past are generally right. Even in our health and our ability to overcome illness and injury, our ability to relate to others,

our future success largely depends upon what we expect. If we see more good than bad, then good is probably what we'll get. Even good news, even good news can be presented in a very bad and gloomy way.

You know, many of you know this, but some may not. We have put on paper and voted by the Board of Stewards, our administrative board, we have decided a goal for 2007 is ten brand new adult members, who will join by profession of faith. People, who have never been baptized, never professed Christian faith before, ten in 2007. Now, it's going to take all of us to meet that goal. I want you to be careful how you present the good news that change is possible, that new life is possible. In my opinion, it is better to start with the possibility of new life than with the certainty of death. Now, some people when they're sort of witnessing their faith, they start with the certainty of death. I think we pretty much already know that. Let's talk more about the possibility of new life.

I heard a story years ago about a very somber minister, all dressed in black. I'm one to talk. All dressed in black, and he was driving a buggy. This was a long time ago. He was going down a road, and he overtook a young man, who was walking down the same road. The minister stopped, and with his dark and gloomy tone, he invited the young man to ride with him, and the man did. As they were riding along, the minister thought to himself, you know I haven't said anything to this young man about his soul. So in a deep ministerial tone, which I don't have, but I'll try, he said, "Young man, are you prepared to die?" The young man turned as white as a ghost and jumped out of the back of the buggy and started running the other way. He said, "Not today, I'm not!" He thought he was being threatened.

When you share your faith, don't be threatening. Let us offer the hope of new life, of a new beginning as Kit was telling the children. Some of us, I'll admit, even myself at times, are not the happiest example of good news or glad tidings or even the new life, which we proclaim. Some of us have legitimate concerns that weigh upon us about the world, about war, about our health, our financial security, our marriage, our children, you name it. Sometimes, though, we get a little bogged down like the writer of Ecclesiastes and say, "Vanity of vanities, everything is empty." That's another way to translate that. Everything is emptiness. What you gain from all the toil under the sun, a generation comes, a generation goes, but the earth remains the same forever. There's nothing new under the sun. It's almost like I've already died, I'm just waiting for the obituary.

Some of us do remember, as we think back, days filled with more possibilities. As we look back, we remember better days; unfortunately, life doesn't give us the privilege of living in the past. The question is do you trust the one who holds the future? Do you believe that the future belongs to God in whom you have faith and hope and trust?

Revelations 21, verse 1 and verse 5, "Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the one who was seated on the throne said, "Behold I make all things new."

All things new. New hearts. New minds. New attitudes. Are you open to God's power to change you? In this New Year, how do you see yourself?

I have a situation at a former church. I won't name which church or which person this is. I did say at the 8:28 service, and I'll say it again. I think from my doing this you do know that each of you are subject to becoming an illustration at some future church, but anonymously of course.

At a former church, I had a volunteer who was very angry with another volunteer, and the entire worship service, it was a contemporary service that was at stake, and the angry member refused to apologize. She said this, "Well, he's not from here. He's just not from here. If he had grown up with me, he would know, everybody knows, that's just the way I am. I'm not going to apologize for the way I am." The problem was, the truth was that rude, demeaning, loud, and arrogant was the way she was. She was saying she was not going to apologize because that's the way she was. When you say that sort of thing, it's got a little bit of atheism wrapped up in it. You may say, Jim, that's way too far to go. No, it isn't.

When you say, "I cannot change. There is no power on Heaven or earth to change me. This is the way I am. I will not apologize. I will not try to grow beyond it. I'm just going to be this way, and everybody else better just get used to it." There's a little bit of atheism wrapped up in that. You're saying that even God cannot change me, and He better not try. Little bit of atheism wrapped up in that attitude. If God is God, there is nothing, which cannot be changed, and if God is God, and we know God best in Jesus Christ, then rude, demeaning, and arrogant are things that God not only can, but also wants to change in your heart, mind, and soul. So when people say I'm just this and I'm just that, and I'll never change, it's a lack of faith. It's a lack of belief. The underlying message is that change for me is not possible.

God says it is possible. It is possible. God says you can have a new mind, a new heart, new priorities, a new life, a new love, and a new ability to forgive and to care about other people, even enemies. That's what God says. If you say differently, then you argue to your own hurt. You purchase your own despair. No, not everything that happens to all of us is good every day. I know that, but we worship and serve a God who does work things together for the good, and so it's appropriate to keep an eye open for, it sounds corny, but God's plan B. I call it God's Plan B. When doors start closing, look around because other doors do open. I have seen this happen. Your Plan A is not necessarily the best just because you want it. God may have other plans. When plans fail or fall, keep a positive eye open for God's Plan B.

I read about a church choir that was raising money to attend a music competition, and decided to have a car wash. To their dismay, after a very busy morning and raising a lot of money, it started to just downpour, to raining in the afternoon, and then the customers stopped coming. Finally, one of the smart women in the choir got up under a little

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awning near the road, and she printed a poster and said, "We wash, God rinses." People started coming back. Business picked up.

In Bamberg, this is a true story, we needed a new church sign so what we did is we formed a committee. That's what Methodists do. It took about a year. We talked about the new church sign meanwhile the sign fell apart. It literally fell apart. All the letters and all the sign and the glass were just lying on the ground one day. I got a computer banner-printing program, and I put across the sign, "Sign broken, church still works." About a week later, we got the \$15,000.00 for a nice new sign.

God's Plan B. Vanity of vanities, though, says the teacher in Ecclesiastes. Sometimes we do feel like that. Emptiness, emptiness, I'm doing all these things, and I'm not getting anywhere. There's nothing new under the sun. Life is just one thing after another. It goes round and round and round. I'm not really getting anywhere. Such a depressing attitude, not at all the attitude we find in the New Testament. It's a cyclical view of history where things go round and round and round, but we're not getting anywhere. In the New Testament, the idea of history and of our lives is not cyclical, but it's linear. We are going somewhere. We are born. We learn things, sometimes wisdom gained from pain, then we die, and then through our faith in God in Christ, we can be with God face to face and all those who have gone on in faith before us. It is linear. We have a destination. Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, our destination to be with Him where He is. The Omega.

That view is a view that some of us might have, and we even find in the Bible of a round and round and meaningless, spinning view of history, but that is not the Christian worldview. This poem that I'm going to read is more of the Christian worldview.

I am the New Year, I am an unspoiled page in your book of time, I am your next chance at the art of living, I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned about life in the last 12 months, All that you sought and did not find is hidden in me waiting for you to search it, but with more determination, All the good that you tried for and did not achieve is mine to grant when you have fewer conflicting desires, All that you dreamed, but did not dare to do, All that you hoped, but did not will, All the faith that you claimed, but did not have, These slumber lightly waiting to awakened by the touch of a strong purpose, I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to Him who said, "Behold I make all things new."

Who were you in this past year? 2006 is all but gone. Who were you? Were you the one you wanted to be? God has given you another chance to play out all the wisdom that you gained in 2006 and before in a New Year starting tomorrow. Who you are on the inside and how open you are to God changing things, this will make a difference in the year to come. When you are alone in a quiet house at night with your thoughts in God, that's where the change can begin, when you pray about the things that you know need changing. So often the New Year is filled with superficial changes where you just want to change your weight and your physique and maybe have some hair plugs. How much

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are those anyway? You know, external changes are not enough. Real change happens, I think, alone in prayer when it's quiet with God.

I like the story of the woman who was out in her yard working when a moving van pulled up next door. Some new neighbors came in. She walked over wearing her gardening clothes, and she introduced herself. Later on, she thought, "Well, you know, I looked kind of scruffy." The next week these new neighbors had a house warming party, and they invited everybody over. The woman wanted to make a better impression so she went and had her hair colored. She struggled into a girdle she didn't wear that often, but she thought this was an occasion. She painted her lips. She applied eye shadow and false eyelashes, painted her fingernails, popped in her contact lens, took off her glasses, and she looked at herself in the mirror, and said to herself, "You know, I look okay. Tonight they're going to see the real me." The real me.

Who are you really? No matter what you do on the outside in 2007, what really needs changing? It's not the outside. You can help your health in some ways, and that's fine, but on the inside is what matters. No matter what your Plan A has been, God's plan is redemption. God's plan is growth. God's plan is change so that we are more like His son, Jesus Christ. You can do the same old, same old again in 2007 and be like the depressing author of Ecclesiastes, or you can choose the new life that God has offered us in Jesus Christ. In the quiet moments of prayer, ask God to guide you what needs changing, and trust Him to give you the power, the direction, and the courage to grow.

Have a new – a really new – blessed year! Amen.