

What's New? ("Behold, I Make All Things New.")

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John 1:1-14

Have you made your resolutions yet? I think most of us have a love/hate relationship with New Year's resolutions. Some of us hate them, because they remind us that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak – habitually weak. We know that most of our efforts at self-improvement last about 3 to 6 weeks. One of the worst investments I have ever made is joining an exercise club, which I have done frequently. The second to last time I did this, I calculated that each trip we made to the gym cost about a hundred dollars. See what I mean? Most of us hate to make promises that we know we are not going to be able to keep, no matter how hard we try. But something in us compels us to keep making them, trying to reform and improve.

Some of us love New Year's resolutions because they give us another chance. The slate is wiped clean, and we get another opportunity to walk the straight and narrow without the baggage of the past weighing us down. This New Year's philosophy both runs afoul of Christian theology and also strikes a familiar chord. My daughters like to thank me for giving the gift that keeps on giving: guilt. Hey, it's tough being a preacher's kid! This is, of course, an occupational hazard for my profession. A friend asked his friend what the minister preached on last Sunday. He said sin. What did he say about it? He said he was *against* it.

I

Clearly the Bible sets the bar fairly high for ethical behavior: the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule in the O.T., and the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commandment in the New. I had a colleague who used to say he was in the fire insurance business; his job was to keep people from going to hell. But the Bible also is very clear that the same God who gave us these commandments is gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And aren't we glad? Two Sundays ago I slipped in a paraphrase of one of the most famous sermon titles in American history; you know it: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," by Jonathan Edwards. Not a very comforting sermon title is it? I said that the Bible presents the scenario of sinners in the hands of a loving God. God surely hates sin, but he loves us sinners; and that is a paradox we have never quite grasped. But it is at the heart of the Gospel.

The best example I know of this is a parent's love for his or her children. We love our children with an unconditional, indefatigable love. We and they know that no matter what they

do, we are going to forgive them and keep on loving them. That does not mean, however, that we do not set rules for their behavior and have great expectations for them. We do so precisely because we love them. Parents who do not care much for their children do not take the time and effort to set boundaries and discipline bad behavior. Many would argue that the opposite of love is not anger or hatred; it is *apathy*.

So, yes, God has given us commandments and set boundaries for our thoughts and actions. That is because God cares that much for us and wants what is best for us. And when we run afoul of these commandments we pay the consequences and often suffer; but God never abandons us. Remember; this is the season of celebrating God's gift to the world: Jesus Christ, one of whose titles was *Emmanuel*: God with us.

II

John drives this point home in our NT lesson today. "In the beginning was the Word." Sound familiar? It should; the first verse in the Old Testament is "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." John takes us all the way back to the beginning to show us that Jesus Christ has always existed was a part of God's plan even before the plan began. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Of course, John is talking about Jesus, because in verse 14 he wrote, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

That word, to *dwell*, in the Greek, means to tabernacle or to tent. In the O.T. the tabernacle was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, the symbol of God's presence with Israel. God chose to tabernacle or reside with Israel; just as God chose to take on flesh and dwell with the human race through Jesus Christ. Wow! We often take the incarnation for granted. Most ancient religions thought it preposterous for a divine being to live among the rabble of the earth. No self-respecting god would slum it on earth when they could live in heaven. Earth was for losers – mere mortals who were weak and finite. In ancient Greek mythology, every time the gods cavorted with humans they got into big trouble.

So, the notion that God would take on the limitations of human flesh was foolish. It didn't make any theological sense. But that is precisely what Jesus did. He did enter our world. And he didn't hang around with the high and mighty, the rich and powerful, the learned and accomplished. He hung around with the poor, with sinners, and outcasts. And those at the top and middle of the social ladder didn't know what to make of that. But that is the nature of divine

love: it casts a wide net and includes all of God's creatures, not just the best and the brightest. Maybe Groucho Marks was more of a *theologian* than he realized when, upon learning that he had been denied membership in a country club in Los Angeles, said, "I wouldn't want to belong to a club that would accept someone like me anyway!"

Let's take this from top: "For God so loved the *world* – not some select group – that God sent his only Son that *whosoever* – not just a predetermined privileged group – shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world *not* to condemn the world but that the *world* might be saved through him." Now, good Presbyterians, which part of *whosoever* and the *world* do we not understand? Since the beginning of time, people have been creating lists and groups: A-lists, B-lists; in-groups and out-groups.

Do you remember the sting of humiliation from being denied membership in some in-group along the way? Not a very good feeling is it? Throughout history, dominant groups: tribes, cultures, nations, philosophies – even religions have drawn lines in the sand and said, "Those on this side of line are good and acceptable and those on that side of the line are evil and not acceptable." This has been the way of the world since the beginning.

But the Gospel says when the time was right God sent Jesus into the world to save the world, not to condemn anyone. To offer grace and forgiveness to anyone and everyone who would receive it. No wonder they crucified him! This ran afoul of every theological, ethical, and philosophical notion of how the world was constructed: good and evil; citizen and alien; friend and enemy; clean and unclean; sacred and profane; elect and damned. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" – full of the steadfast love of God that endures forever and is offered to all of God's children. John refers to Jesus not only as the Word but also as the Light, the Light of the World that has shined into the darkness of the world and the darkness has not overcome it.

III

That word light is a powerful image in scripture: it represents knowledge, learning, enlightenment, awareness, discernment, and wisdom. It enables us to see in the dark. I saw a History Channel show this week that explored the underground caves the Knights Templar had built when they were outlawed by the Pope. They built a huge complex underground where they wrote many symbols and images on the walls, which have been studied by scholars for years. When the bright television lights were brought into the caves for filming the show, the scholars

were astonished to see hundreds of drawings that had been there all along but which they had not been able to see with their weaker gas lights.

Remember when Saul the Pharisee was on his way to Damascus to persecute the first Christians because their faith and practice ran afoul of the Judaism he had learned as a young boy and studied and practiced all his life? When Jesus, the Light of the world, appeared to him, the light was so bright that it temporarily blinded him. Several days later, when the scales fell from his eyes, so had the blinders that had given him tunnel vision, and he was able to see the fullness of God's plan with crystal clarity. And it turned his world upside down. Saul the Pharisee who persecuted Christians became Paul the Apostle, the great missionary to the gentile world. He had new eyes.

You and I suffer from various visual impairments, both physical and spiritual: Presbyopia or near-sightedness, astigmatism, myopia, cataracts. I have often wondered why the ophthalmologists picked on us Presbyterians and not other denominations; you never hear of *Methodopia* or *Lutheranopia*. It's not fair! Anyway, when we receive the grace of God through faith, God transforms us into the people we were created to be: *love machines* instead of selfish brats. We receive new eyes with which to see the world and new ears with which to hear the Word of God. John Calvin refers to Jesus as the *new spectacles* through which we see the world.

We take up residency in a world where faith, hope, and love are our primary values, instead of money, power, and fame. We discover a new desire to live *grateful* lives that are suffused with love, joy, peace, and patience, instead of a life where the world revolves around us. We live in a brave new world, where God and others take priority over us, a world where joy and peace come from loving God and others.

Right now, things are tough in the world. People are losing their jobs, homes, and retirement savings or are afraid that they might. We hear bad news everyday. But the good news of the Gospel is that God is always with us and that God walks with us through the valleys of death throughout our lives, no matter how bad things get.

So the message of the New Year is always one of hope and promise. We get a do-over. The mistakes or the failures of the past do not weigh us down. Let me close with a modern parable that I hope drives this point home. A farmer's old donkey managed to fall into an abandoned well. The farmer called in the neighbors in, and they could not think of anyway to get this old donkey out of the well. The farmer concluded that the only thing to do was to bury

the old animal right there in the well. So he and the neighbors got shovels and started throwing dirt into the well. The donkey was surprised at first, but instead of going along with the farmer's plan, every time a shovel full of dirt landed on his back, he shook it off and stepped higher onto the ground that was rising below his feet with each shovel full of dirt. Eventually, so much dirt had been shoveled into the well that he was able to walk right out of the well.

Life frequently shovels stuff on us. We can just sit there and let it bury us or we can shake it off and refuse to be defeated. What do you say? What is your New Year's resolution this year? Mine is very simple. Instead of vowing to eat less and to exercise more and to be a more kind and loving person, I have decided to take a page out of Mary's book. When Gabriel told her that she was about to do something impossible, she said, "let it be to me according to your word." In other words, "Thy will be done." In any event, that's John's story, and I am sticking to it. I invite you to join me. Let us pray.