

Something Old, Something New: Taking Inventory
Luke 2:41-52
Colossians 3:12-17

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
December 30, 2012

Out with the old. In with the new. The calendar year ends tomorrow at midnight. What are *you* doing New Year's Eve?

If you lived in Norway, you'd be hoping to find a heap of broken dishes outside your door. People save their old dishes to throw at their friends' houses on New Year's Eve. Having lots of broken dishes outside your house means you have lots of friends.

In Japan, you would attend have been attending a series of "forget-the-year parties" called Bonenkai held during December to bid farewell to the problems and concerns of the past year and prepare for a new beginning. Houses would be scrubbed and misunderstandings and grudges would be forgiven. At midnight on December 31st, Buddhist temples strike their gongs 108 times, in an effort to expel 108 types of human weakness.

If you were a child in Puerto Rico, you'd throw pails of water out the window at midnight. That sounds like fun to me! It is supposed to rid the home of evil spirits.

Americans from down south eat black-eyed peas with ham hocks or collard greens for good luck. My Swedish grandmother served creamed herring. At my Cuban mother-in-law's house everybody would get exactly twelve grapes to eat for good luck while the clock struck midnight—one grape for each month of the coming year.

Filipinos wear clothing with circular patterns, like polka dots, to attract money and fortune. The Dutch eat doughnuts; the circular shape of the donuts symbolizes "coming full circle" and is supposed to bring good fortune.

The practice of making New Year's resolutions dates back to the Babylonian empire, the most popular resolution being to return borrowed farm equipment.

What are *you* doing New Year's Eve?

It's not a church holiday. We already celebrated our new year last month on the first Sunday of Advent, when the liturgical colors changed to purple and we started preparing for Christmas. Eric and I set off party poppers during the children's sermon that day as I recall...!

It was Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. who established January 1 as the official date of the New Year of the “Julian calendar,” but for much of the Christian era, the church frowned upon New Year’s celebrations as pagan. Western nations have only been observing the New Year on January 1 for about 400 years.

Some Christian groups have developed a tradition of holding “watchnight” services on New Year’s Eve. I noticed in working with new immigrant groups in New York City that these watchnight services are especially important to the African Christians, who typically come together for worship and prayer well into the wee hours of New Year’s Day.

But, for the most part, it seems that New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day just don’t belong to the Church (with a Capital C). We could say that whatever happens out there at the night clubs, in the bars and at Times Square is not our concern, since it’s not our holiday, and we would be partly right. But I think we would also be partly wrong. A lot of time, energy, hype, money and alcohol goes into celebrating the New Year, and it might be good for everybody involved if the church had a word or two to say on the subject.

Here are a few of my thoughts. They arose from the simple task of reflecting on this morning’s assigned scripture texts from the revised common lectionary.

Number 1: *From one year to the next we worship a God who is doing something OLD.*

Our faith is ancient history. By that I don’t mean it is obsolete, the way we say that things like VCRs and walkmen are ancient history. What I do mean is that our faith is ancient the way a California redwood forest is ancient. Our faith is ancient, it is grounded, it is rooted in the rich history of a particular chosen people, and consistent with that history up until the present moment.

The Gospel of Luke makes this point early and often in the way Jesus is portrayed. According to Luke, Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. As an infant he was presented in the Jerusalem temple, according to Jewish custom. After coming of age, he traveled to the Jerusalem Temple with his parents for the annual Passover celebration. And in conversation with the chief priests and elders, he demonstrated how well he already knew the torah and its interpretation.

God didn’t just drop Jesus from the sky one day and say, off you go, Son, straighten these people out for me, OK? No. God had been in constant, loving relationship with God’s people from “the beginning,” and when God sent Jesus it was as part of that same trajectory of watchful loving care, compassion and discipline that God had been providing all along.

“Do you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus asked his mother. Don’t you understand that I belong here, here in the temple, where I can be in thoughtful conversation with wise elders about who God is and how God acts? Do you not know?

As 2012 melts away into 2013, we can say with confidence that nothing essential changes. As the ball drops in Times Square, we can celebrate how God is doing something OLD. We can celebrate our faith’s ancient history. Which brings me to my second point.

Number 2: *From one year to the next, we worship a God who is doing something NEW.*

That’s right. Something new. Did I just contradict my first point? No not at all. God’s ancient history continues to be written in the present. What happened before was leading up to what is happening now which is leading up to what will happen a year or two or ten or 800 years from now.

The boy Jesus had been raised in a Jewish home and synagogue. He was learned in the ancient Jewish scriptures and their interpretations. But God had new, saving work for Jesus to do, and in today’s reading from Luke we see that beginning to play itself out. Jesus belongs to God’s ancient history, but his work will be a unique manifestation of that ancient history. He will show God’s ancient mercy in an entirely new way.

As 2012 melts away into 2013, we can say with the confidence of our Christian faith that all things are being made new. As the ball drops in Times Square, we can celebrate how God is doing something NEW.

In Jesus Christ God is reconciling the world to himself. In Jesus Christ, God is establishing peace with justice. In Jesus Christ God is renewing the whole human family and all creation for loving relationships and for eternal salvation. In Jesus Christ God is tapping you and you and you on the shoulder and saying, come, follow me deeper into this life of faith. In Jesus Christ God is on the ground, deployed, here in our midst at the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green, saying:

I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac & Rebekkah, the God of General Bloomfield and Charles Ives. I am your God and in Jesus Christ I am doing a new thing in your midst for the life of the world.

As 2012 melts into 2013, we can say with confidence that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. We are part of ancient history, but we are the part that is being written now and is therefore brand new.

There is always a lot of talk this time of year about making New Year's resolutions. I have made and broken my fair share of New Year's resolutions over the years, and I admit I have become a bit scrooge-like on this subject. If you're going to make a New Year's resolution I won't try to talk you out of it.

But I will interject my third and final point here. Making a New Year's resolution is a fine tradition, and God knows we all have room for improvement. We should have no shortage of ideas and suggestions: lose weight, quit smoking, exercise regularly, call mom more often. Our epistle reading today lists the great Christian virtues—traits that are considered signs of new life in Christ Jesus—that we would all do well to take to heart: “put on compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, and crown these with love...” All good. All, indisputably good.

But the point I want to introduce here is that generally speaking we think of New Year's resolutions in individual terms. Each of us thinks of something we will do, ourselves, in the New Year, usually along the lines of self-improvement.

But Jesus' teachings and Paul's letters and indeed the Gospels themselves weren't written for individuals. They are written to the Church (capital C) and to particular churches. They are written to form and shape entire communities, to galvanize us around shared priorities and coach us in our life together.

I wonder how the notion of an individual New Year's resolution fits into that? Doesn't it make more sense for us to resolve at the beginning of the New Year to undertake something together? To put it bluntly, Jesus wasn't born for you, he was born for us. Jesus doesn't call you and you alone to a life of discipleship. He calls us together to be a community that embodies his love and justice in the way we care for one another and the way we engage the outside world.

I invite you to try to work the church—this church—into your 2013 New Year's resolution. I am excited to see where that might lead us.

Happy Old/New Year.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling