

A New Heaven, a New Earth, and a New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Revelation 21:1-6a
January 1, 2016 – New Years Day; First Sunday after Christmas

The Lord spoke to Jeremiah saying, “I will make a new covenant with my people. It won’t be like the covenant I made with their ancestors, when I brought them out of Egypt. This time I will put my law within them. I will write my covenant on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” The concept of covenant was, and still is tremendously important to the Judeo-Christian Community. A covenant is a type of oath, a binding commitment between two parties, made in front of witnesses, and frequently sealed with a covenantal sign. The book of Exodus calls the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the Book of the Covenant.(Ex. 24:7) In Genesis, God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants that never again will God flood the earth. And God places a rainbow in the sky as a sign of that covenant. Eight chapters later, God establishes a covenant with Abraham – a promise of land and descendants; and seals the covenant with the sign of circumcision. Psalm 89 speaks of God’s covenant with David – a promise of God’s steadfast love, forever. But perhaps most important is the Sinai Covenant in which God presents the law and the commandments to Moses. It was in Sinai that God told God’s people, “This is how you should live; this is what it means to be the people of God.” Now, approximately seven hundred years later, in the prophetic age, Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that is written on the hearts of God’s people.

Jeremiah was not the only prophet who longed for a new relationship between God and the people. Ezekiel speaks of a time when God will give the people a new heart and a new spirit (Ez. 11:19-20), and Isaiah speaks repeatedly of new *things* springing forth (Is. 42:9; 43:19; 48:6). The book of Deuteronomy tells us: “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” (Deut 30:6) Indeed, the prophets longed for a day when people would not need to be taught the ways of the Lord – it would be a part of them. It would be who they are. It would be second nature – they would truly live as the people of God.

Even in the passage we just read from The Book of Revelation we find an echo of the prophets, for the 65th chapter of Isaiah tells us: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”(Is 65:17) The prophets foresaw a day of restoration and renewal, a

new time when the old would pass away; and this was the same vision that John reports in his revelation as he tells us that he saw the one seated on the throne who said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Indeed, that’s what Christmas is all about; for the Apostle Paul speaks of Jesus as “the New Adam,” bringing forth a new creation. The birth of Jesus was not just a blip on the screen of history. No, the birth of Jesus is truly a transformative event; providing a new teaching, a new beginning, a new way of living, a new creation.

Newness of time, a new beginning, a new and good gift of God – We cannot begin to discuss such issues without first recognizing God’s grace. Grace – the love of God freely given to all God’s people. The psalmist writes, “I will sing of your steadfast love, forever; with my mouth, I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.” God is, above all else, a kind and loving and merciful God. God wants to enter into a loving relationship with God’s people, and God wants the people to share that love.

So today is New Years Day. Last night folks gathered on Time Square in New York City, Market Square in Pittsburgh, Fountain Square in Cincinnati, and Public Square in downtown Cleveland. Folks gathered on streets, in public houses, and in private homes around the world to celebrate the end of the old and the ringing in of a brand new year. And in most of the English speaking countries of the world, the strains were heard:

Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot and days of auld lang syne?
For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne,
we’ll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne.

Auld Lang Syne. . . It’s a Scottish phrase that literally means “days gone by” or “old time sake.” And so we ask, “Should we forget our old acquaintances?” And we answer, “Of course not, we’ll take a cup of kindness, for old times sake.” I’m reminded of the old campfire song: “Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other, gold.” But New Year’s is about more than just old acquaintances. It’s about more than old friends, and it’s about more than remembrances for old times sake. It’s about new beginnings, new beginnings following a new birth. New beginnings with a new commitment to follow the path of the babe from Bethlehem.

This is a covenant service, modeled after the New Year’s Service of John

Wesley. This is a service about our relationship with God. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant – not like the covenant that God made with the ancestors of old, but a covenant that God will write on the hearts of God’s people. “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

Should old acquaintance be forgot? Of course not. But old sins? My friends, they are gone. . . for the Lord says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” In a few minutes we will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion and I will lift a cup. . . not a cup for old times sake; but the cup of the new covenant – a covenant of blood poured out for each of us for the forgiveness of our sins. The sacrament is above all else about relationship. That’s why we call it “communion.” We truly come into communion, into relationship with the living Christ, as we join in relationship with each other as the body of Christ in the world. I can truly think of no greater cup of kindness, no more effectual gift of God’s love than the blood of Christ, poured out for our sins.

It’s New Year’s Day. It’s a time of new beginning. Will you begin a new relationship with the risen Christ this day? If you’ve never invited Christ into your heart, will you do so today? And, if you already have a relationship with the Lord, will you take one step further in your personal journey to Christian perfection? Will you seek to become the body of Christ in the world this New Year? Will you become an agent of His love, His peace, His hope and His joy? Will you so become one with Christ that you will truly make a difference in the world? Will you so enter into a relationship with Christ such that the first heaven and the first earth will pass away?

In a few moments, you will be called to make your own covenant with God for the New Year, your own agreement with God, your own commitment to put off the old and take on a new heart and a new spirit. I invite you to consider how you are being called to put on that newness of life. How is Christ calling you to be His body in the world? How is Christ calling you to be in communion with Him and with all our fellow sisters and brothers? How is Christ calling you to be in ministry to all the world?

It’s a new day. It’s a new year. It’s a new beginning; and Christ says, “Behold, I make all things new.” May it be so for you this very day. Amen.