

Meadowbrook Congregational church

“All Things New”

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Numbers 6:22-27

22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

²⁴The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Luke 2:15-21

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Because of the busy nature of the Christmas season, it seems that something has caught me by surprise. We are just a few days away from the end of a decade. Although it seems like only a couple of years ago when we survived all of our Y2K fears and ushered in the millennium, it is now ten years later and we are about to leave behind the single digits of the 21st Century. I wouldn't have realized this marking in time if it were not for the sudden plethora of lists in magazines, television and radio; the greatest and worst and most important people and accomplishments of the decade. Such lists are how we usually acknowledge such important transitions.

I recently read of a man's visit to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England. The observatory is famous as the location of the prime meridian, the line of demarcation for measurements of longitude around the world. The invisible line dividing the Eastern and Western Hemispheres passes through the Observatory and people love to go there just for the picture. They straddle the meridian with one foot in the Western Hemisphere

and the other in the Eastern Hemisphere. While the line is invisible, it is duly noted at that particular spot with a brass strip.

One of my regrets about moving from the state of Utah is that I never got to visit another popular demarcation spot, the famous “four corners” region of the United States. This is the place where four states: Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona all share a common border. If you are flexible enough or really good at the game Twister, it is possible to have an arm or a leg in four different states at one time. It is a popular tourist thing to do and a photographer’s delight.

We sang one of my favorite Christmas carols last Sunday, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” The reason I like it so much is that it contains some very powerful and thoughtful words. In especially like the end of the first verse, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” Those words describe a holy night, the intersection of human anxiety and promise that occurs when the gift of God is born in the manger at Bethlehem. It is the most vivid example of a time and location when God stands in two places, or when the worlds of the human and the divine meet.

I don’t know if I am being overly philosophical or even extra sentimental, but I believe the carol’s words about the meeting of hopes and fears carry the same kind of weight as we approach a significant marking of time such as the arrival of a new year. New Year’s Eve is supposed to be a great party night, a time in which people celebrate the arrival of a new calendar of days. But it has always seemed to me that because we celebrate something new, most of us also are prone to reflect on the passing of that which is old. One of the quotes I used in the January church newsletter was from Hamilton Wright Mabie. He wrote, “New Year’s Eve is like every other night; there is no pause in the march of the universe, no breathless moment of silence among created things that the passage of another twelve months may be noted; and yet no man has quite the same thoughts this evening that come with the coming of darkness on the other nights.” Mabie is right. There is something about the marking of time on New Year’s that leads us to some serious reflection about what has gone before, and to sincere prayer and hopes for that which is to come. The period around a new year is one of the few times when just about everyone is thinking of the same thing, watching the old slip away-never to come again, waiting for the new to arrive-hoping better things come with it.

For me, New Year’s Eve has never been so much about making personal resolutions as it has been about finding the blessings and wisdom of God in the path that has been walked and seeking God’s direction for the hours and days ahead. John Greenleaf Whittier said, “To thank Thee for the era done, and thank Thee for the opening one.” The Protestant tradition has a history of observing this kind of attitude in historical “Watch Night” services. Started centuries ago on the European continent, these services were adopted by the Methodist tradition in England as a way of maintaining spiritual preparation and meditating on God’s grace in the gift of time. Originally held monthly, the services came to be observed only on New Year’s Eve. Legend has it that the African-American tradition borrowed the “Watch Night” tradition on the New Year’s Eve before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. From that year on, the new year was celebrated by a gathering of the faithful to reflect upon the survival of life’s dangers, seen and unseen, and the commemoration of how God’s people “got over” the Red Seas of life. It would seem that for many generations, the

end of a year and the coming of another has been a time to reflect and give thanks and to celebrate and pray.

Perhaps the perfect model for New Year's Eve is the namesake of the month of January, the Roman god Janus. Janus was the god of gates and doors, of beginnings and endings. He is always represented with a double-faced head, each face looking in opposite directions. Janus was worshipped at the beginning of the harvest, at times of planting, at weddings, births, and at the beginning of important events in a person's life. This time of year is a time for looking in opposite directions. It is a time to look at the past with regret or with thanksgiving. It is a time to peer into the future with fear or hope. The coming of a new year is a time to stand in two places at once, a time between a past and a future, a time between what was and what is yet to be.

The Scripture lesson from the book of Deuteronomy is words that were used in the Temple during ancient ceremonies of thanksgiving and remembrance, times when the people of God recognized that they stood between a past and a future. "Remember all the way God has led you. Remember, for the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land in which you will lack for nothing." There is talk of remembering and thanksgiving. There is talk of the future and hope. The God who is remembered and appreciated is the same God in whom the faithful are urged to trust their future.

The reading from the book of Revelation tells of a new heaven and a new earth, and of the dwelling of God with human beings. It speaks of a time in which God shall at last get the world that God always wanted. It encourages each of us as followers of God to bend our lives to the vision of that world, to submit to that promise, and to trust in that new heaven and new earth actually coming into being. It speaks clearly about that which we hope for in our future, that which is based on God's faithfulness in our past.

A writer once described our human frustrations with life as coming from the fact that we live with "one foot in the infinite and the other in the finite." We occupy two worlds, one bound by time and all of its limitations and the other eternal-unlimited in the scope of its mystery and meaning yet full of hope and possibility. Perhaps this is the source of any anxiety or regret we may have about the end of a decade and the coming of a new year. We may not like what we have lived through but it is a known commodity. We are uncertain about what lies ahead, perhaps even fearful that there are more dark clouds around the next bend of time.

But the promises of Scripture tell us that our God is present in both worlds. God was present in the routine and activity of each day that has gone before. God was present in the blessings that came our way and in the sorrows that brought us to tears. And God will be present in the final victory of good over evil that will come as promised in some future time. Indeed God will be present in all of the days in between. Because of God we are not bound by time nor are we bound by our fear of what will come with time.

New Year's Eve may technically be just like any other night, but just like the Prime Meridian, there is something special to set this night aside as important. It is a marker in time, a place to take mental or spiritual pictures of whom we are and where we are going in time. We stand with one foot in the past and the other in the future. We look at things with one eye reflecting upon God's past faithfulness and the other eye anticipating what is to come with great hope.

This week, like the ancient writer of Deuteronomy, we must remember what God has done for us during the past year and to know that this same God will be with us in the future. Today, like the writer of the book of Revelation, we must find our hope in believing that God's promise for our future is always fulfilled.