

“What’s New?” by Ken Burton



January 1, 2017

New Year’s Day

Revelation 21:1-6a

Matthew 25:31-46

When I agreed to preach this Sunday, I had expected us to be working with the lections for the Sunday after Christmas. I realized only ten days ago that Celebration Circle, indeed, “my” mission group, had decided to use the lections for New Year’s Day as the biblical basis and our service this morning.

New Year’s Day, as a holiday, seems to me to be lacking in Biblical grounding. It is one of those secular holidays, like Thanksgiving, which, because it has some spiritual connection, has been imported into the church calendar. At Seekers, we only celebrate it when it falls on a Sunday, and sometimes not even then, so today is a somewhat special occasion in that regard.

Another qualification on the New Year's holiday is the arbitrary basis of its dating, a problem it shares with most of the rest of our calendar, which, as you may know, was designed by a sixth century CE monk named Dionysius Exigus, or Dennis the Small, or, in a more current idiom, "Little Denny.". His lack of physical stature is unrelated to the historical significance of his work. As a consequence of his efforts to correctly date Easter, Dionysius put together a system for numbering years which is used worldwide today and which includes January 1 as the beginning of each of them.

We can do a bit of holiday parsing by putting aside the "year" aspect and asking what, exactly, is new about this point in time, regardless of the name we give it.

For many of us, the first "new" thing that comes to mind first is the major change in our national political leadership that will occur on January 20. It is hard to know now whether the change in personalities or the change in priorities and policies will, in the long run, have the greater impact, and what that impact will be. Then there is what looks like a realignment of the major parties themselves. For example, The Washington Post on Friday noted that the average value of homes owned by those who voted Democratic was about \$100,000 more than the homes of the Republican voters. Like it or not, these political changes, the social changes of which they are an effect, and, my greatest concern, the potentially horrific social changes of which the policies may soon be the cause, all of them can certainly be called "new," whether we like them or not.

Now I look at my own life and ask, "What's New?" My first response is, "Not much, really", but that seems a bit disingenuous. I have recently begun a new round of talk therapy to try to address my depression, which has become a bigger factor in my life. My relationship with my daughter Johanna, which has been good for years, is becoming even stronger, as she shares with me not only her depression but

other painful concerns, and I am privileged occasionally to be “spoken through,” to being a channel of God’s love for her. This is new in my relationship with my daughter, and a gift for which I am truly grateful. A third “new” piece for me is my increased attention to and care of my own body. While arguably this should have begun long before now, I am paying more attention to my weight and diet and, I hope, my exercise, than ever before.

Finally, there is a concern, which, while not new, has been coming into my awareness with increased energy of late. This is about my stewardship of time and energy. Like many of you, I am heavily involved in the internal structures of Seekers, particularly in the work of my mission group, Celebration Circle, but unlike many of you, I do not have a parallel involvement in a place of brokenness and pain outside of the church, a place of mission in our suffering world. For the moment, I’m not sure why this is or what, if anything, I should do about it, but it seems to be a place of new attention for me in the new year.

The passages that we read this morning from Matthew and from Revelation both speak of the “new,” albeit not about New Year’s. The Revelation 21 passage makes explicit references to “making everything new,” with supporting detail about what that will look like, and the teaching ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 25 describes a radically upset social order in which those who care for the weak and suffering come out on top, while those who do not are condemned.

Apocalyptic passages, that is, those describing the coming end times, are a major feature of Jesus’ teaching, so much so that some scholars characterize Jesus as a “Jewish apocalypticist”. These itinerant preachers roamed the countryside proclaiming that the historical God of Israel would soon intervene to both bring a violent end to the Roman domination of the Jewish people and of the territory of ancient Israel and, more generally, to put an end to history and to time itself. In

Jesus case, there is evidence in the Gospels that he came to believe that he was the Promised One who would return to establish what would truly be a new world order! One of the great Christian theological problems, technically termed “the delay in the Parousia” is that this did not happen within the lifetimes of the first generation of Christian believers and two thousand years later, it still has not happened.

I recall getting a series of spam emails in the months leading up to the turn of the millennium predicting with great certainty that this history-ending event, the Parousia, would happen on January 1, 2000. Maybe you received some of these as well. I spent that day at my computer ready to deal with any issues that might arise in my employer’s systems as a result of the much-heralded “Y2K” problem. These issues did not occur as a result of the thousands of hours that had been spent in advance of the new millennium taking preemptive measures. I have no explanation for why the Parousia was further delayed beyond that date. I have received no further emails on this subject, and in the seventeen years since, it has still not occurred. My best guess is that it is unlikely to come about in the future, and that we need to find some other ways to understand the Biblical passages predicting the inbreaking of the radically new.

So, if the “new” in our passages for this morning does not refer to the end of history, what is there in them that is truly new and that we can embrace on this first day of our new year?

One response is that the passage from Matthew in particular provides new perspective on our concern for our suffering sisters and brothers, that passion that lies at the heart of Jesus’ injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves. By setting this concern in the context of the end of time, Jesus gives new energy to his teachings about how this unqualified love of neighbor is to be paramount for our time and our place in the world, whenever and wherever that might be.

I am going to read again the passage from Revelation. I will follow that with a quote from *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, a commentary on the Revised Common Lectionary.

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day. And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne, "Look! God's Tabernacle is among humankind! God will live with them; they will be God's people, and God will be fully present among them. The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen. The One who sat on the throne said, "Look! I'm making everything new!"¹

Even if the vision is eschatological, should it be any less compelling? Is it not usually the vision of what can be that forces us to question what is and what has been? It was the future that beckoned the [Hebrew] exiles to forget the old and look to the new. It was the Christ-event that shattered the old with the utterly new. It is the hope of a future totally defined by God that shatters our reliance on the past and moves us along toward a new time, a new day.²

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Revelation 21:1-51, Priests for Equality (2007). *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, p 798.

²Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker (1992). *Preaching through the Christian Year – Year A*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, p.63.