

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 5, 2014

“A New Name from God.”

Ephesians 1:3-14

A minister wrote in the church newsletter that he was setting goals for the New Year. One of his goals was to clean up his desk. Another of his goals was to find last year's goals. Some of you may keep a desk like that.

Some of you will remember the “Calvin and Hobbes” comic strip. In one strip, Calvin and Hobbes are talking about the New Year. Calvin says, “I’m getting disillusioned with these New Years. They don’t seem very new at all. Each New Year is just like the old year. Here another year has gone by and everything’s still the same. There’s still pollution and war and stupidity and greed. Things haven’t changed. I say what kind of future is this? I thought things were supposed to improve. I thought the future was supposed to be better.” Hobbes replied with his usual keen insight, “The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present.”

The New Year is traditionally a time for reflection. We look back over the year and assess our successes and failures. We gain some satisfaction over our successes, and we experience some grief and guilt over our failures. Each time we face a new beginning, we have hopes that things will be different and hopefully better. But as Hobbes says, the future just keeps turning into more of the present.

That may be why some of us come to church in the hopes that the Holy Spirit may fall afresh on us and the future will be full of exciting new possibilities, positive change and new growth. We tire of having the “same old, same old.”

Listen to our very upbeat Scripture from Ephesians 1 for this New Year, “Praise be to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons (and daughters) through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

That is good news! We are God’s chosen ones. His elect. God doesn’t want our lives to be hum-drum, meaningless, depressing routines. God wants something better for us than that. That’s why there are some things we need to recognize as we begin this New Year.

First of all, we need to see that God loves a new thing. He said in Revelation 21:5, “See I am making everything new.” He said practically the same thing through Isaiah, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing” (Isaiah 43:18-19). That is the exciting thing about knowing God. God loves doing a new thing. You and I are often afraid of change. We long to be able to cling to the status quo. Someone once said that status quo is Latin for “the mess we’re in.” It’s dangerous to stick to the status quo.

Let me share an example. Something happened in 1906 that dramatically changed the game of football. Before that year, football had been a low-scoring game of running and kicking. Guys in leather helmets plodded down the field methodically seeking to overpower the other team. Ever hear the expression “three yards and a cloud of dust?” This was the strategy used throughout football before 1906. Then something happened. The forward pass was legalized, making it possible to gain forty yards with one throw. During that first season, however, most teams stayed with the tried-and-true way of playing the game three yards and a cloud of dust. One team, however, took another approach. Coaches at St. Louis University decided to switch to an offense that used the forward pass. That first season they outscored their opponents 402 to 11! Sometime change is for the better. God loves change, especially, changed lives.

Resolutions are hard to keep, wouldn’t you agree? How many of us have ever been determined to drop an old habit and begin a new one? How many have ever seen a resolution shattered the same day you made it? Turning over a new leaf is hard.

What we need is not inspiration but transformation. Not a resolution but a revolution. We need a change in our lives that comes from God. What every person needs is something that will truly satisfy our longings; that something will bring lasting change. What we need is for God to do a new thing within us. And that can happen. God loves doing a new thing.

The second thing we need to realize is that God loves giving people a new name. That is the biblical way at looking at life. A new name symbolizes new possibilities.

Look at Simon Peter, the disciple who forgot Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek and slashed a man's ear off with a sword, the disciple who fled when danger neared, and denied his master with a curse. Jesus dared to call him "Rock." Jesus knew his real name. Everyone knew Simon as a man with hot emotions. He was unstable. His temper flared. There were times when he was uncertain of himself, and times when he couldn't make up his mind. His emotional reactions were completely unpredictable. A rock was the last thing most people associated with Simon.

Jesus saw through Simon's weakness and told him that his weakness could be his strength through the transforming power of God. Jesus was determined that he would use Simon's fiery emotions and his impetuous actions to accomplish his purpose in the world. And so he named Simon what Christ needed him to be, "Rock."

That is what we need as well. We need someone who can look beyond our faults and weaknesses and not only love us, but expect the best from us. Someone who will believe in us who will give us another chance who will call us by another name.

Some of us are our own worst critic. We are more than aware of our weaknesses and imperfections than we are our strengths. We feel inadequate and guilty. We feel that much of what we do turns out wrong. We have had more than our share of failure. However, Jesus longs to give us a new name.

I'm amazed how many people think that God sees only the bad in them. They believe he is more aware of their failure than he is in the good in them. They think that God is waiting to find something that they say or do so that he can pounce on them and condemn them. We need to know that God is more happy over the good in us than he is in the bad. He is more anxious toward our goodness than to punish our evil. Many times when we are condemning ourselves, God is trying to help us realize his forgiveness. The Bible says, "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20). While we are calling ourselves failures, God is calling us "forgiven." God is calling us by a new name, but all the while we keep insisting our name hasn't changed.

We often talk about believing in God, and forget that God may also believe in us. We yell and scream and flaunt our wickedness before him, refusing to believe in his amazing grace, but all at once we begin to wonder if perhaps it could be true. Could God love me after all, even when he sees what I really am? Could it be that my life could be different? Is it possible that the Bible is for real when it says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)? And what about the verse that says, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Could it be that our names have changed? We are calling ourselves failures while he is calling us friends. We are calling ourselves losers while he is calling us "my beloved." We are calling ourselves sinners while he is calling us saints. Could it be that God is giving us a new chance, a new lease on life, a new name, no matter how many times or how miserably we have failed? God loves doing a new thing within his people. God loves giving people new names. What a great and transforming imagination God has. How full of love God's heart is. How powerful his Spirit, to take our failures and give us a future.

When people talk about other people, they sometimes say, "That person will always be that way. People never change. They are hopeless." But God knows better. One of the benefits of being in ministry is the opportunity to see people change often quite dramatically. Never underestimate the power of God in your life on anyone else's.

Those the world called tax collectors, Jesus called disciples. Those called sinners, Jesus called companions. Those scorned as immoral, he called forgiven. Those called common fishermen, he called fishers of men. A crucified thief he called an heir, an heir of paradise. What names have you been called? What names have you called yourself? Jesus Christ offers you a new lease on life. A new chance in this New Year. A new name.

A New Year is also a good time to give other people a new chance. It is a time to also expect the best from them; to realize that perhaps with a little help and trust from you they could change. Give people a chance to begin over again with you. You and I are to forgive those who have sinned against us. If we cannot even forgive each other, how can we ever hope to experience the unconditional love and forgiveness from God? When we call other people names it influences their identity and their future. We are to speak the name that God would speak to them.

God wants something better for us in this New Year than we have experienced in the past. Think about the names God has called using the Scripture for the day. He has called us blessed, chosen, holy, blameless, adopted sons and daughters of God. Are you still carrying around an old name failure, loser, sinner? Listen as God gives you a new name for this New Year, and then go out and live as blessed, chosen, holy, blameless, adopted sons and daughters of God.