

January 1, 2012

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 & Revelation 21:1-6a

New Year's Day
Rev. Douglas Reble

“In The Fullness Of Time”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

Well here we are, on the first day of a new calendar year. Did any of you over do it in your celebration of New Year's Eve, last night? I suspect for many of us, we didn't do much celebrating at all. And I suspect for many of you, New Year's is one of the more meaningless and depressing holidays of the year. An old year passes and a new year arrives. Big deal. All that means is that you are one year older, the earth is one year older, and time continues.

I suppose there was a time when people believed that the new year brought grand new possibilities for human advancement. We are progressing onward and upward. But it is rather hard to find people who really believe in human progress these days. Humanity seems to take one step forward and then we take two steps backward. Let's be honest here. Do you think, really think that the events of the past year suggest that we are moving upward and onward?

Of course, nobody says this better than the writer of Ecclesiastes, where today's first reading comes from. Ecclesiastes is well-known as one of the most depressing books of the Bible. It is one of the more familiar parts of the Bible, but when you look at it critically, you may wonder why.

In a way it is beautiful poetry, but it can also be seen as rather meaningless because life itself can be very meaningless. There is a time for this, and a time for that. But what does it all add up to? Very little. We get up in the morning and go to work. We come home in the afternoon. So what? We build up a retirement account and we lose that retirement account or our health which doesn't allow us to enjoy it. You work hard to get out of the sixth grade and all that means is that you have to work hard to get out of the seventh grade. This Ecclesiastes asks, "What gain have the workers from their toil?" In other words, what does it all amount too?

And where is God in all of this? God doesn't play very much of a role in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Here God is mentioned as the one who gives us our days, and it is said here that God has been busy from the beginning of time, but we can't figure out just what God does among us. God is the one who has "put past into future" into our minds. God has created us as people who know the passage of time, and yet God has also created us as people with limits: "They cannot know what God has done from the beginning to the end." God exists and God is busy, but nobody knows what God is doing. It is all rather depressing!

At least give Ecclesiastes credit – it is not solely depressing, it is also honest. There are times in our lives when we feel just like the writer of Ecclesiastes feels. We get up. We go to work. We work. We come home. We sleep. We got up the next morning and put on our clothes, got to work, and on and on. And what does it all add up to nothing.

Many religions in the world take this circular view of time. Time keeps going in an unending circle. Past, present, and future. Past, present, and future. The goal of many of their religions is somehow to rescue us from this unending cycle of time.

But not the Jewish and Christian faiths. We as humans, with all of our human limits, cannot really change the course of time, nor can we make some big contribution that adds something truly new to the world. Elsewhere the writer of Ecclesiastes says that there is, "Nothing new under the sun." Still, Christians join our Jewish brothers and sisters in believing that God doesn't simply withdraw from our time, but enters our time.

In fact, we are even now in those Sundays after Christmas. This is not merely New Year's Day but also the first Sunday right after Christmas. The great affirmation of Christmas is that God did not leave us to our own time, an endless cycle of just one thing after another. God entered our time. God stands with us.

Thus, we also read today a lesson from the last book of the Bible, the vast Revelation to John that ends in a grand vision of a new home and a new earth. The new Jerusalem will be fully realized on earth and God will dwell among us.

Of course, that is exactly what we said happened when we gathered here on Christmas. We said and sang that in Jesus Christ, God was coming to earth. Human history had gone along in its established ruts, in its cycle of one thing after another. But on a night at Bethlehem there was an announcement to the shepherds that God is truly doing a new thing. God is coming from earth and dwelling among us. In fact, that was the name we were told to call Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us.

Friends, that affirmation makes New Year's a joyous rather than a depressing time. As you go through this New Year you will undoubtedly be doing many things that you did in the Old Year. I'm sure that you will do many of the same things that you have done in the past. You will follow pretty much the same schedule in the coming year that you followed in the past year. You will think many of the same thoughts that you thought before. You will have many of the same challenges that you have previously faced. And yet, by the grace of God, there may be true newness. I believe that God not only loves us, but there are certain gracious moments when God intervenes for us. God steps into our time, and that divine stepping into our time is sometimes disruptive and sometimes reassuring and wonderful. God really grants something new.

You know this. There are times in your life when you have stood before a closed door, a dead end, and then to your surprise, God entered. God knocked on the door – or knocked down the door – and you had a future offered you that you could not have created on your own.

As we begin this new year, 2012, we begin with faith that God does not leave us in our time, but God makes time for us, takes time for us, and that our days become God's days.

Thank goodness God does not leave it all up to us. It is not our primary task to make the New Year turn out right, to fix everything that is wrong with the New Year in the New Year. God comes to us. The message of Christmas changes everything in the days after Christmas.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. The Book of Revelation is not only found at the end of the Bible, but it is also a vision of the end of time. In the end, when time as we know it is brought to a conclusion, that ending shall be in the hands of God. God will not destroy the earth but will rather bring the earth to its grand conclusion. God shall finish the work that God began in Genesis. In the meantime, which is the only time we've ever had with God, God will continue to work with us and will continue to transform our often frustrating, disappointing, human time into God's good time. For that we say, thanks be to God! Because of that, I can say, Happy New Year to you all!

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God as we stand on the threshold of a New Year we ask you to accompany us into these new days that lie before us. Lead us into that newness that only you can bring. Redeem our days. Make the times of our lives your time. Bless us with your presence, making this New Year the fullness of your time. AMEN.