



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

A New Year

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A sermon delivered at the Garden Church in San Pedro, CA

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Readings:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Revelation 21:1-6

The Year as a House, poem by Jan Richardson

[\(http://paintedprayerbook.com/2009/12/31/epiphany-blessing-the-house/\)](http://paintedprayerbook.com/2009/12/31/epiphany-blessing-the-house/)

New Year's Day....it holds such a momentous ring to it, doesn't it? We can put such power and pressure on New Year's Day. It's the time I'm finally going to start that new exercise program, or start a regular prayer practice, or budget better. We put these high expectations on the power of those digits changing over, as if the change in the calendar somehow wipes clean all of the things that have gone before. But then, we woke up this morning and we were still the same people we were yesterday, maybe a bit more tired than usual, after staying up past our bed-time. We still have that annoying habit we want to change, we still have that debt that gives us a pit in our stomach, we still have that routine we want to do differently.

The world seems to be pretty similar to what it looked like yesterday as well—we're still anticipating what this new year will bring, wondering at how the changes in the political leadership will shape our world. We look around with trepidation, or hope, or resolve, wondering if this new year brings forth a change in everything. But then we see that some of our neighbors still slept outdoors last night, acts of violence happened around the world even before we woke up, and while we hold hope for the new year to bring transformation and change, the world looks quite a lot like what it looked like yesterday.

In our scripture from the book of Revelation today, from the very end of the Bible, we hear these words that are reminiscent of the new year, about all thing being made new. The text reads:

“See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s people, and God Herself will be with them;

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also God said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then God said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

This is in the same passage that we invoke each week as we begin our worship together, thinking about this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, descending on earth, this new way of being in the world, the river of the water of life, the tree of life, these images that inspire us to be cultivating this land and cultivating more peace and justice in our community and in the world.

This image of all things being made new is one that is appealing and has been used throughout Christian history in a multitude of ways. Readings of this text can lead to apocalyptic constructs about the return of Jesus and the destruction of this earth. Or the text can be taken completely symbolically, that this is something that is a myth or story with a message. These images can and have been used to dismiss the physical needs of the world, to focus only on the spiritual, or to urge on natural destruction to hasten the new heaven and new earth.

It probably won’t surprise any of you who’ve been hanging around the Garden Church for long that we have a different take on this passage and what these images and stories are calling us to. I hear the message of this passage as something that is a little less clear cut than it being all about the destruction of this physical world or only about some spiritual realm. I hear a

message that is a little more inclusive of the messiness of humanity and the power and beauty of divinity and the heavenly influence.

The vision of a new heaven and a new earth is a vision both of what the future may bring, and a vision that calls us to engage right here, right now—today—in this new year. We need to be active and engaged in bringing this vision into reality, a vision of a new way of being is not something that is beyond our human efforts to attain. And it is also not solely a human endeavor. There is a God and force of creative and healing love in the universe that is the source of this work, and whose transformative Divine Love is reaching and pulsing through the universe, and always urging and pressing to be received and to work through us for healing and peace in the world. Engaging this vision shows up in so many ways.

This past week, I had the opportunity to meet a wise sage named Andrew, who is a pastor in the Community of Christ, my fiancé’s faith tradition. Andrew and his wife Jewel have spent their lives dedicated to the work of the church, and particularly to work of peace and justice in the world. They now live in Harvest Hills, an intentional community built in the 1970s outside of Kansas City by a dedicated group of people who wanted to experiment with what it might mean to live the peaceable kingdom in a neighborhood.

Before we had lunch together, we took the tour of the community. We walked out onto the circle, a lovely grassy area surrounded by the town houses, and down into the room where the community meets for worship. Andrew took us straight over to a banner hanging on the wall and said: “This, this is where it all starts.”

We looked up and read these words:

“And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them;” [Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants, Section 36:2h-i]¹

For Andrew, a man who has dedicated his life to the work of peacemaking and ministry in many forms, this passage is a guiding principle. It tells him that there is both a hope and a vision of a future that is beyond what we see among us right now, and that it is realized by the tangible and present work of engaging each other in one heart and one mind, living in right-relations with God and each other, and doing the very real work of justice and equity that will bring our world to a place where no one is lacking in basic human needs.

As he spoke about it, I could feel the resonance in myself and in the call on my life, the work we’re doing here, the work so many people throughout the world are dedicated to, in so many ways. And the tension. The tension between the image, the vision, the Divine narrative of making all things new, and the day-to-day reality of the world we’re living in, and the struggles and things that need to change here and now.

Some apocalyptic theories operate out of the idea of everything being washed away, taken away, people rising out of graves and disappearing from beside you. This is one way to interpret some of this imagery. But many traditions—from the Quakers to the Community of Christ, the Swedenborgians, to main-line theologians—explore what in technical theological terms is called: realized eschatology.

This new heaven, and new earth are here and now as much as they are in a future and spiritual realm. The kingdom of heaven is not something that is beyond us, or a completely different realm. It is in all the places where heavenly ways of acting and being and treating each other prevail. That the peaceable kingdom—Zion, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God—these images are not simply ethereal, but tangible. They include people being fed and an

¹ *Doctrine and Covenants*. Independence, MO: Herald Pub. House, 2007. Print.

end of violence and war, respect for all people, and the honoring of the many ways to engage love in the world.

This does not take away the spiritual part of it, the heavenly realm beyond the physical, and the imperative of the Divine doing this work with us. But it brings all of that into focus in the here and now around us. We are each part of doing the work of this transformation. The peaceable kingdom, the New Jerusalem comes, not all in a flash in one moment of apocalyptic time; it is the work that we are constantly called to. And this is what it seems appropriate to focus on here, together in worship, on this New Year's Day. The kingdom of God is within us, between us, among us, God is here. How are we each going to engage the Divine Love with us as we step forward into this New Year?

Because yes, we were still the same people when we woke up this morning. But it also is a new day, a new start, a new moment to listen and commit to the work that God has in front of us this year. Listening to what we are each called to—individually and collectively—in this new season we are entering into. We are still the same people, but we also are the people who have the opportunity to begin anew, to turn, turn, turn as the passage from Ecclesiastes tells us. This turning reminds me of the Greek word “metanoia” which is often translated “repent” or “repentance,” while one of its other simple messages is a “change of mind” or to turn. As we enter into this new year, we are reminded of the ever present offer from God to turn, to turn towards love and away from hate, to start anew, to turn away from that selfish habit that commandeers generous loving in a relationship, to turn towards respect and mutual care. To turn from the things that hold us back from being present to the work in the world, from believing our belovedness in God, from connecting with other people.

And so, as we close out one year and start the next, we can offer gratitude together, for all the lessons and gifts and blessings this last year gave. And we can let the rest fade a bit. The slate does not get wiped all the way clean, but we're given a moment to pause and remember that God is in all of it, and holding all of it, and that God is always making all things new. Always offering

us the opportunity to be made new. It doesn't clear everything away, but we can always turn and receive.

The Divine Love is that Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end and holding out the vision for each of our lives and our world that is both beyond what is right in front of us, and grounded in it. And because of this loving presence, we can walk forward with courage. The message of "do not be afraid" from the Christmas story is still here with us. Calling us forward, as we walk into this new year knowing that, Emmanuel, God is with us.

Amen.