

How Do You Feel About “New”?

Steve Hollaway

Revelation 21:1-6

Harbor Church

January 1, 2012

Here we are at the beginning of a new year, so it's natural to think about what might be new and different and better this year. The Bible often uses the word “new” to talk about things getting better. God says in Isaiah “I am doing a new thing,” in Ezekiel “I will give you a new spirit and a new heart,” in Jeremiah “I will make a new covenant.” “New” is often the language of God's promises, a description of what God will do in the end. “New” is the goal of history—along with peace and justice and God being praised.

The apostle Paul and the early Christians talked about what happened to believers as being “a new creation.” What Jesus did was said to create “a new humanity” which united both Jews and Gentiles. Ethically we are to put on “the new self.” Jesus opens up “a new and living way” to God. In Matthew 19:28 Jesus calls the event at the end of history—what we sometimes call the Last Judgment—“the renewal of all things.” That's the goal of history: the renewal of all things. And the phrase I want you to think about most this morning is what God says at the very end of the Bible: “I am making everything new!”

So how do we feel about all this newness? As we ourselves get older and older, do we still like the idea of God making the world newer and newer?

I couldn't blame you if you were a little cynical about newness. All our lives advertisers have been saying that every product is “New and Improved”—when often they were neither. We know that changing the trim on the model every year is not necessarily improvement. We learned the hard way that the cars produced in the 70's were in no way better than the cars of the 60's, even though they were newer. This year's cell phone doesn't always work better than last year's. I went into a donut shop this week and several of the shelves were marked by a paper sticker that said “New!” Why would anyone think that a new variety of donut was better than the old favorites? The odds are against it. More likely, it will be like “New Coke,” which almost no one liked better than “Old Coke.” Innovation is not always improvement.

So now I'm sounding like a real conservative—or a guy rounding the turn into the big 6-0. Why go for the new when the old is good enough? Certainly on Block Island “new” is suspect and “old” is good. Historicalness is next to godliness, right? On the island we are oriented toward the old and the quaint. The danger is that we will be a community that preserves the resourcefulness of our ancestors while quashing the creativity of current residents.

The same thing is true of a church, of course. One pastor in the Boston area told of a tourist walking up to him in front of his colonial-style church building and asking, “Excuse me, sir, is this a church or a museum?” The pastor thought to himself, *God, I hope it's a church!* Is a church about preserving something that was—60 years ago when we built this sanctuary or almost 250 years ago when this congregation organized, or almost 2000 years ago when the church was founded? Or is the church about working with the God who makes all things new? Is it possible that at times God says to his people, as he said through Isaiah, “Forget about what is past. I am going to do a new thing. Don't you see it?”

The God of creation is also the God of re-creation. At the beginning of time, God stops at every step and says, “This is good!” At the end of time, God is like a little kid sitting at a table

with Play-Doh, calling out to us, “Look! I’m making everything new!” God is the artist who isn’t satisfied with the way his old pieces turned out; he’s got to make something new and better.

Most ancient cultures had a view of time that was circular. Every year or every century or every millennium, things would come back round to where they started. Even some Christians have talked that way, as the Christmas carol says, “When with the ever-circling years comes round the age of gold.” Somehow, they say, we will get back to the garden or get back to when things were right. But the biblical view of history is that time is linear. We are going somewhere. God has a purpose for all of this. There is a goal to time. Where it’s all headed is what we call the kingdom of God in its fullness—it’s the age of Shalom, the time when peace and justice rule the world, when the creation is renewed and God makes everything right.

That’s what God is talking about when he says “I am making everything new.” That’s what Jesus means when he talks about “the renewal of all things.” When Jesus came, he was something new. He was not like the prophets before him. He was not like the other teachers of his day, but spoke as one with authority. And what he said was new. His message was like new wine; you couldn’t put it in the old wineskins of Judaism. When he came to this table with his disciples, he said, “This is the *new* covenant which I am sealing with my blood.” Of course there was continuity between what Jesus said and the law and the prophets—but Jesus went beyond them, so there was discontinuity as well. He did not teach his disciples to sing, “Give me that old-time religion.” He taught them to sing a new song.

So here we have this dilemma. A church by its institutional nature and unchanging message is innately conservative. The island by its orientation toward the past values the old more than the new. And most of us are of an age at which we cherish the music and the morals and the politics of an earlier time—whether that is the 40’s or 50’s or 60’s or 70’s. And yet we are committed to a Jesus who is about making things new. We follow a Jesus who in terms of our society’s values is a revolutionary. We say we want to live in a kingdom in which God takes over and makes everything new.

Where is the truly good? Is it behind us, or out ahead of us? The Bible is consistent in picturing the truly good as something that is yet to be. When Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom of God, he is proclaiming a future that has yet to come completely. The good—or at least the best—is out there in front of us and we strain to reach it, not thinking, as Paul says, that we have already grasped it but straining with all of our being to reach it.

You know the motto of the state of Rhode Island: “Hope.” That’s a profoundly Christian motto. Paul says that we are saved in hope, that we live in hope. Hope is not wishing that something good will happen; hope is the confident assurance that God is in control of the future. Romans 8:20 has a curious expression: that “the whole creation was subjected [by God] to frustration in hope.” “Frustration in hope” is a good description of life. What kind of hope was this? It was the hope, Paul says, “that the whole creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom and glory of the children of God.” That freedom and eternal life that we just begin to experience as Christians in this life is the destiny of the whole creation. That’s what we hope for. That everything will be renewed. Everything will be made right. No more death, no more sorrow. The lion will lie down with the lamb. The divisions among us will be gone. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That’s our hope. In Revelation it’s not only a vision of victory over the forces of evil but a vision of every nation, tribe, and tongue being brought together around the throne of Jesus the crucified one, under his rule.

Christianity is a religion that is future-oriented. Hope is what pulls us into the future where God is already working and where God has already triumphed. That future into which we are being pulled is the new thing Jesus and the prophets were talking about.

But because we humans—and especially we church people—tend to focus on the good we knew in the past rather than the good we hope for in the future, we fall into the trap of cherishing the old at the expense of the new. We substitute nostalgia for hope. Our worship services become an experience of nostalgia rather than an in-breaking of God's future into our consciousness. When we come here and face the new-making Jesus, we have to ask ourselves, "Do we want a *new* earth or an *old* earth?"

Kennon Callahan wrote in *Twelve Keys of an Effective Church*, "Hope is stronger than memory. Memory is strong. But hope is stronger." The church that thrives is not built on memory, primarily, but on hope.

As we enter a new year, we have an opportunity to think of the new thing God wants to do in our midst. To pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" is to pray for something new to come. What might God want to do? For starters, if we begin with the greatest commandment, God might want us to love him more—with all our heart, mind, soul, strength. When we did the Natural Church Development survey, the diagnosis we received was that our spiritual life was the weakest part of our church life. When we began to talk together about what we could do differently to increase our love for God and to center our lives more on Christ, some people got very angry because to call for something different implied a critique of the current state of our spiritual life. "I'm *happy* with my spirituality." "Nobody has the right to criticize my spirituality"—or, apparently, *our* spirituality as a church. I was reminded of one time in Kentucky when an older member said to me, "But Pastor, if all those new ideas are right, it means we've been doing it wrong all these years." No, not necessarily. Maybe it was the right thing in the 50's but it's not the right thing now. And maybe your spiritual life was right for you as a 30-year-old but not for you as an 80-year-old.

But is it true that if God says he wants to do something *new* it means that something is lacking in the *old*? Yes! There *is* a critique inherent in the promise. God is not satisfied with the world as it is. Are you? God is not satisfied with you as you are. Are you? Not me! I'm not even close to being satisfied. I know God wants me to be so much more than I am. And I believe God is in the process of renewing me, re-creating me into someone more fully human and more in tune with God.

At the very end of Oswald Chambers' classic devotional book, *My Utmost for His Highest*—in the daily entry for December 31—he says, "Leave the Irreparable Past in His hands, and step out into the Irresistible Future with Him." As we step into the New Year, we have the opportunity to step into God's future, to orient ourselves toward hope, expecting that God will change us into something new in the year ahead. My hope is that God will make our church not just successful and solvent, but make us new.