

What's New

Lamentations 3:21-23, Mark 2:18-22

And so it has begun...2015 and our 200th Anniversary celebration. And what a great beginning to our celebration with the Ugandan children last Sunday. What a spirit of joy and energy they brought to our services. A lot of us have commented: "If we could only bottle some of that energy". Well, I think God does continually give us new energy and God does renew our strength. Maybe not to be able to jump and down on these steps like the kids did, but I believe God wants to equip us and give us the spiritual energy to carry out his mission and ministry in this place.

Today I want to talk about how God makes things new and seeks to renew our spirit and renew our work together as people of faith.

The comedian Henry Youngman tells about the time he was thrown out of an antique shop. He said: "All I did was walk into this antique shop and I asked: What's new?"

I came across this little poem having to do with how we look at things, describing our particular vantage points:

*As the covered wagon rolled and pitched along the prairie track.
One sat looking forward and one sat looking back.
One searched the wide horizon for a bright and better day.
And one saw the disappointing road 'till it too slipped away.
As the covered wagon rolled and pitched along the prairie track.
One sat looking forward and one sat looking back.*

Makes you think, doesn't it? I mean, where do you see yourself sitting in the covered wagon of your life. Looking forward or looking back. And where do we see ourselves sitting in the ministry of our church? Are we looking forward to the possibilities and the potential that exists...or do we get caught up in our traditions and the road that has already been travelled.

Now don't misunderstand me. Our traditions, our history is very important. That's why we are celebrating 200 years. 200 years of rich history of the life of this church. So many wonderful things that have been part of that history. Just think of how many lives have been

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impacted by this church's ministry over those 200 years. But we need to constantly remind ourselves that God is in the renewing business. God is continually seeking to bring new birth and new life. So I hope when someone new walks into our church they won't see it as an antique shop, but rather an exciting place where God is transforming lives and doing new things.

We have so many wonderful stories we can tell in this anniversary year. There is great value in knowing our history and traditions. They say a lot about how God has been faithful to us and how God has led us in the past. We are grateful for so many different people who have given leadership here and so many who have served faithfully. But we must also be careful not to let our history or our traditions become a roadblock to new ideas and future ministry.

You've heard about the famous 7 last words of the church:

WE'VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE (8 WORDS IF YOU SEPARATE THE CONTRACTION)

And depending on our own special interests and particular concerns, we may have been guilty in uttering that cry. Maybe we haven't said it out loud, but others can tell by our attitudes or reactions.

This is always the challenge for us both personally and corporately as the Body of Christ. Seeking what God may be wanting to do in our lives, changes we may need to make in order to be obedient to the Spirit. In other words, I want to make certain that I am not allowing an attitude of resistance to change or new ideas stifle the Spirit of God. This applies to our personal life as well as to the life of the church.

I am impressed with the number of times the Scriptures speak of God doing something new.

Just a few of the many references:

Isaiah 43:19 See, I am doing a new thing! Maybe we should call that the first 7 words of the church! See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

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Jeremiah 31:31 The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant.

II Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old is gone, the new has come!

And then one of my favorite passages in the book of Lamentations. The people are weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem...but they are not in total despair because they look to the God whose compassions do not fail. And then these words which make up the chorus for the hymn Great is Thy Faithfulness:

- Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

That's what makes our anniversary celebration special...we have seen God's faithfulness, we have experienced God's compassion...now we can say, Lord I am looking for your new mercies...I am looking for the new things you want to do in me. I am trusting in the new mercies you will bring about in the life of our church.

When the Holy Spirit came in power at Pentecost, there were those who couldn't accept the change that was taking place. Surely these men are drunk, the people scoffed. These who were skeptical were people who knew their religious history, they understood their traditions, and so they had a hard time seeing anything differently. But God was ushering in a new day. A new age with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And it is that same Spirit who brings new life and fresh wind into our lives.

It's an interesting encounter Jesus has some of the disciples of John the Baptist. There were many who were caught up in their ceremonies, and laws, and traditions, but Jesus wanted these followers to see a new day was dawning. And he proceeds to tell them about new wine. In Jesus' day goatskins were often used to hold wine. As fresh grape juice fermented, the wine would expand, and the new wineskins would stretch. But a used skin, already stretched, could

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break. Jesus was bringing a newness that would not be bound by the old ways.

And so we have to ask ourselves: where are we willing to be stretched? How are we open to the renewing of the Holy Spirit, that may ask us to do new things. It may require moving out of our comfort zones personally. And it will challenge us as a congregation to be open to God doing new things in our ministry.

I know there are many people in our society who often ask this question: How is the church relevant to my life? How can the church speak to my life's journey? Sometimes people have a misunderstanding of what the church is all about, and sometimes it is someone's own resistance to seeking God's presence in one's life. But I also wonder if sometimes it is the church's failure to be an instrument of God's grace in the world. It can happen. We can become more intent on maintaining the institution rather than impacting the community and culture around us.

So it begs the question: what do we do about that? Obviously it requires a lot of prayer and soul-searching. So that we are in the right posture and frame of mind when we approach this important issue. And then I believe it is a call to be people of vision... Believing the God who has led us in the past is the God who wants to do a new thing in us. The God who said, Behold, I am doing a new thing, is the God who wants to do new things in your life and in the life of our church. There are so many opportunities for ministry and service right here in our surrounding communities...and I am grateful for the many ministries that we are already doing, but we must always be open to discover new places of ministry. We must be willing to allow the Spirit of God to speak to our hearts and give us a vision for the future.

There is a well known story about the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo, a boy named Giovanni, and a famous statue. Every day after school, Giovanni would rush to Michelangelo's studio to watch the famous sculptor chip away at a 14 foot high block of marble. Week after week, the boy came and watched as the magnificent form of David began to take shape. Finally, the work was done. The boy was absolutely amazed by the transformation of this piece of marble into

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the beautiful statue of David and in all innocence he said to Michelangelo: how did you know that man was in there?

Well, obviously Michelangelo had a vision of what he could create. And eventually his vision became a reality.

And so it is with our relationship with God. God sees our lives, God knows the potential within us. That's where we are different from the block of marble. We can resist the changes God may be wanting to do in our lives, we may be unwilling to discover that potential. But if we dedicate ourselves to the vision God gives us, that vision can become a reality for the work of Christ's kingdom here on earth and right here in our own communities.

This day, this year, this Anniversary year, we earnestly pray: Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me... And we also pray; Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us as a living community of faith... Help us to see what you want us to see and renew your Spirit within us so that we may carry out the mission you have given us.

Conclusion: As we seek to find God's continued direction for our church, I invite you to take a few minutes to reflect on the two questions on today's insert. And at the end of the service to hand it to the usher or put in the box on the welcome table in the narthex. If you want to take it home and bring back next Sunday, that is fine as well. Let us earnestly seek God's renewing presence in our lives and seek God's direction as we look to our future as a community of faith.

Prayer before filling in form.