

"NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTIONS"
Colossians 3:12-17
January 2, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Does anyone else think it is significant that New Year's Day is one week after Christmas? Besides giving you a whole week of vacation between the two holidays- there really is a theological connection. Leave it to a preacher to bring God in to your winter break. Of course, we know that Christmas is all about God- the birth of Jesus- God as a human being. Angels singing, shepherds and wise men worshipping the baby. You know the story.

But what about New Year's Day? What does that have to do with God? We often look to the first day of a new year as a fresh start. The days, weeks, and months stretch before us, as yet untouched, unsullied, filled with possibilities. I think the new year is the "so what" of Christmas. Now that Jesus has been born, "so what?" What difference does it make?

As we put our Christmas decorations away until next December, we have the opportunity to think about what the birth of Jesus means for each one of us. Perhaps we know what it means when we see the Christmas tree, open gifts, sing carols, or light a candle on Christmas Eve. But what does it mean the rest of the year - without the twinkling lights- when the reality of our ordinary days sets in?

What does it mean when the holiday is over, and we have to go back to school and back to work and return to our regular routines? What does it mean when we have schedules to meet and bills to pay and decisions to make? What does the birth of Jesus mean for us then?

I am sure the shepherds and the wise travelers wanted to remain at the manger with that baby. Perhaps Mary and Joseph wished they could freeze time as they held their child and watched him sleep. But no one is allowed to stay at the manger- not even Jesus.

The birth of Jesus was a miraculous event, but it wasn't an end in itself. He was born- like we are born- for a purpose. His first visitors came to see and worship him and then they left, returning to their homes and their lives where they told everyone about him. If everyone had stayed in the stable, how would anyone else have known of his birth?

The birth of Jesus had consequences- for those who saw him and held him and loved him, but also for those of us who never saw that baby. After the angels returned to their place in the heavens and the night sky was still and quiet- life went on. And it continues to go on.

When my nieces and nephews were infants, I would sit in a rocking chair, holding them while they slept, marveling at their perfect little faces, wondering who they would become. I often wished that we could just stay there, in that moment, and I could hold their warm little bodies forever. I wished that they would never have to deal with pain and sadness, grief and suffering.

But that would also mean that they wouldn't experience joy and love and happiness. It would mean that they wouldn't grow into the people they were created to be- sisters and brothers, moms and dads, teachers, artists, healers, friends. The world is better because they are in it; because they grew up and found their way.

Jesus came to change the world. His birth calls us to new life, to new understanding, to transformation. And what better time to talk about transformation than on the cusp of a brand new year?

I don't know about you, but I leave the year 2021 feeling battered and bruised. We thought 2020 was tough but in some ways 2021 felt even more difficult. Just as the year came to a close the world lost Desmond Tutu and then, on New Year's Eve it was Betty White- one last gut punch. Many people I know are worn out, exhausted, fearful of what the next few months will bring. Perhaps this is a really good time to think about the "so what" of Christmas.

The birth of Jesus inaugurated God's new movement to transform humanity, to call people back to God's intention for the beloved community. This is what fuels us as a community of faith all year long. If we are wondering how we will accomplish this- the Apostle Paul gives us some fashion advice. Yes, fashion advice.

In his letter to the Colossian Christians, he sounds like those annoying reporters who stand on the red carpet, push a microphone into the face of a movie star and demand, "Who are you wearing?" The star says the name of an exclusive fashion designer and the reporter moves on to the next overdressed celebrity.

How would we react if someone asked us, "Who are you wearing?" According to Paul, we should say, "God." Sometime today, take a look at your t-shirt drawer or pile- what do the logos on your shirts say about what is important to you? Do they advertise musicians? Sports teams? Designers or corporations? Church events? Places you have been?

When we wear those shirts, we are giving other people a good look at who and what we value. Paul says that we should clean out our closets and get rid of anything that doesn't shout, "God!" He cleverly uses the metaphor of clothing and the symbolism of baptism when people take off their old clothes, and after baptism, put on brand new clothing to signify their new life in Christ.

Earlier in chapter three, Paul gives a list of the old clothes we should get rid of- anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lies. When we change clothing he says, we will be transformed. We will be a part of a community that excludes no one- and again, he gives a list. Here is who is no longer excluded- Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free.

Paul is very clear that claiming a new life in Christ has consequences for every aspect of our lives. Once we let go of our old ways- anger, wrath, etc...- we have room to build a new wardrobe with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And the one garment that pulls everything together, goes with everything and fits everyone is: Love.

Paul isn't just giving us a list of how to dress for church- he is showing us what a life transformed by Christ looks like. This isn't just what we wear in the privacy of our own homes or even in the sanctuary during worship. This is what we wear ALL THE TIME, EVERYWHERE. And not only do we wear these traits, we embody them as a part of our very being as individuals and as a community of faith. Paul knew that we cannot be Christians alone. We must all upgrade our clothing choices and then continue to encourage one another when things don't fit as well as we would like them to. When one needs an alteration, another will offer support.

People who see us and what we are wearing will get an idea of who God is. When the people of God are angry and mean toward others, when they judge and exclude people, God's reputation takes a hit. When people see Christians who are greedy and self-centered they rightly think God is like that too. The character of God determines the character of God's people. If we believe that God is compassionate, kind, patient, forgiving, loving, and peaceful then we will be that way too. And others will notice.

As Christians, we say we believe that Christmas changes everything. Is that how we live? How we worship? How we function as a congregation? Do we allow the truth of the incarnation to guide us all year long? Or do we pack it all away along with our Christmas Eve Mary and Joseph costumes?

So, how do we sustain the spirit of Christmas all year long? Paul makes two suggestions. First, he says we should live thankfully. "When you do everything in the name of Jesus, do it as thanksgiving to God." Our response to the great gift of Christmas is a changed life- a

life of gratitude- a life conformed to the character of the One who calls us "holy and beloved children."

Second, Paul reminds us to celebrate Christmas all year long as we worship together. The key word is "together." If we have allowed Christ to rule in our hearts, then our outside should match our inside. We know this isn't always easy- Paul knew that too. That is why he is writing to a congregation of Christians and not to one or two individuals. He knew that it really does take a village to raise and to sustain a Christian.

So, are we dressed properly for this new year of 2022? Some probably think we should be wearing a suit of armor or maybe just wrap ourselves in blankets and stay in bed. But Christmas calls us to not just live transformed lives, but to change the world. And we know that much change is needed.

As tough as last year was, I think we have already begun to plant the seeds of transformation. Pastor Martha Tataranic writes, *"A lot of us have felt stuck during this pandemic. Being slapped in the face now with the prospect of more long, dark, isolated, and restricted months ahead feels like the proverbial straw breaking our collective back. And yet, we are learning from this pandemic that what feels like a pause button has actually been a catalyst for change. It might feel like we've been going nowhere, but all along we have been collectively considering in profound ways who we are and who we want to be, what is and is not working."*

"We have been forced en masse into that great spiritual terrain of wilderness. And the reflections that have poured out of us during this wilderness time- about the importance of community, how interdependent we are and how we might better care for one another, about equality and dismantling systemic injustice- are all essentially spiritual in nature. There is no way of journeying through the crucible of pain and loss without something new in us being born."

As I look ahead to this new year, I come back again to the words of Old Testament scholar and prophet, Walter Brueggemann. *"The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."*

Get dressed, my friends, we have work to do! American anthropologist Margaret Mead is often quoted as saying, *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

What does it mean for us, for our congregation, this year if we wear Love? Compassion? Kindness? Gratitude? There is much to be born within us and within this world. We have celebrated the transformation borne into the world on Christmas- now we carry it forward

into our lives. The birth of Jesus was a revolutionary act by radical God. Brave human beings were divine instruments in making it happen. God's revolution of love and justice is now our responsibility.

In your bulletin is a page entitled, "2022 New Year's Revolutions." We aren't going to talk about resolutions today, but REVolutions. As individuals and as a congregation-

What is God calling to us to reveal and to change in this new year?

Where is God calling us to radical transformation? Who is God calling us to be in the days to come? What needs to be shaken up? Changed? Adjusted? In our personal lives and in our life as a community of faith?

Take a moment or two and write down your thoughts. If you want to share them- you will have a chance during fellowship time after worship. Email them to me if you want.

I hope that you will continue to ponder and pray about these revolutions- tape the paper to a place where you will see it only a daily basis. Look at your revolutions and then ask yourself- do I have the clothes I need to be a part of God's transformation of the world?

I will close with the words of another prophet- a young woman, Amanda Gorman, Youth Poet Laureate. Her poem for a new year.

"May this be the day

We come together.

Mourning, we come to mend,

Withered, we come to weather,

Torn, we come to tend,

Battered, we come to better.

Tethered by this year of yearning,

We are learning
That though we weren't ready for this,
We have been readied by it.
We must always pave a way forward.
This hope is our door, our portal.
Even if we never get back to normal,
Someday we can venture beyond it,
To leave the known and take the first steps.

So let us not return to what was normal,
But reach toward what is next.
What was cursed, we will cure.
What was plagued, we will prove pure.
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;
Those moments we missed
Are now these moments we make,
The moments we meet,
And our hearts, once all together beaten,
Now all together beat.

Come, look up with kindness yet,
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,
But to take on tomorrow.

We heed this old spirit,
In a new day's lyric,
In our hearts, we hear it:
For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne.
Be bold, sang Time this year,
Be bold, sang Time,
For when you honor yesterday,
Tomorrow ye will find.
Know what we've fought
Need not be forgot nor for none.
It defines us, binds us as one,
Come over, join this day just begun.
For wherever we come together,
We will forever overcome."

So let us not return to what was normal,

But reach toward what is next.

With God's help, may it be so.

Amen.