

“A New Year, A New Opportunity”

Revelation 21:1-6

Today is the beginning to a new year, the year 2012. A new year brings new possibilities, a fresh chance to make life better. It's a symbolic beginning to a new day, where we can all push forward in making this year the best year possible, and a new opportunity to right all the wrongs of the past year. A new year is indeed a symbolic new beginning for us all.

Today we have a special opportunity by having church today on New Year's day. Like having Christmas on a Sunday, having New Year's day is a special opportunity to honor God and ask that we begin the New Year with a solid spiritual foundation that honors God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We have the opportunity to begin the year keeping God first, which not only is the proper thing to do, but also a thing that will ultimately bless our own life and honoring what is God's alone.

Today for our focus reading for the sermon I chose the lectionary passage from Revelation today. I chose this, because not only are we in two weeks going to begin a sermon series on the seven churches of revelation, but because this passage is meant for times such as this. This passage of scripture not only gives hope in times of darkness, but it also gives us hope when things are starting new. It's a passage to me that means a better tomorrow is always ahead of us. It means that

soon the world that it is meant to be will come and that we will be a part of it as long as we keep the faith of Jesus Christ.

In our passage from Revelation, we come to near the end of the book, after John the Revelator has given us much of the apocalyptic vision of the end times and of the tribulation that faces the earth. After all of the hardship and trials that come forth from the difficulty of the end times, we have a vision, of a new beginning, of a new opportunity that is given. The new vision is a vision that all people who believe in Jesus Christ can be a part of in their lives.

As many of you know I have spent much of my life as a student, spending many years (actually, make that almost too many years) in higher education. It seems that the beginning of a semester or quarter is filled with excitement, of the prospect of learning new things. I always take the beginning of a new semester as an opportunity to start over, to begin better habits for school to constantly push forward in improvement for school. My aspirations are good and my goals for a new term are sound, but I know that coming soon things will probably get rough in the term, and life as a student will begin to get more difficult.

After a few weeks into the new academic term, life does get rough again. Time gets short, I run out of time to get assignments done. My goals of doing every bit of reading for class eventually gets diminished and I have to begin to decide which reading assignments to do and where I can squeeze by a certain week

just to make academic ends meet. It becomes very difficult and sometimes I feel disappointed in myself, because I had such aspirations to do well and try to be a better student. I fall short, but I still keep pushing forward.

Then it comes near the end of the term. In the last few weeks excitement begins to build again, which is the hope and dream of being done with the drudgery of this academic term. I see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is a break, be it Christmas break or Spring break, or Summer vacation. There is hope for the academically weary, and that is the end of the term.

While you might not be a student now, you can probably find examples of this cycle in your own life. Sometimes the feeling of hope and aspirations are in the beginning of a new job or in the beginning of retirement. You begin with great hope and aspirations, but then things get crazy or fall apart, but then you see hope. In our lives we all experience cycles of life, just as we experiencing a cycle right now, in the beginning of a new year.

Our faith story is composed of many cycles that give us new opportunities. If you look at the whole story of the Bible, there are cycles of great aspirations in the beginning, falling short or getting discouraged, but then hope in the end. This can be modeled by such stories as the creation, or the story in Revelation, or in the life of Jesus Christ. Life is full of cycles that give us meaning to our lives and ultimately hope in lives wherever we might be.

This past advent we've been touching on the story of the Israelites in Isaiah. We haven't focused on Isaiah during advent, but we've seen snippets of the story in Isaiah throughout our readings in the worship service and many of the prophecies concerning the coming of Jesus Christ come out of Isaiah. In the story of the Israelites in Isaiah we face a cycle where there is aspirations in the beginning, falling short in the middle, but hope for a better tomorrow.

To understand the story in Isaiah, you have to go back before the book was written. The Israelites were a people that had much hope in the beginning of their history, hoping to be the people God called them to be. They had a kingdom which would honor God and give the Israelite nation a legitimacy with its neighbors politically. There was great hope in the kingdom, that they could be the people they were meant to be.

However, by the time we reach Isaiah, the kingdom was falling short of their aspirations. By the time we reach Isaiah the kingdom had been split into two portions and the northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom, Judah, was barely hanging on. The people were putting themselves ahead of God, and they were eventually punished by falling completely to the Babylonians. They had fallen short and they had totally lost any hope in ever having a future, let alone having the future that they were called to have in God.

They were exiled to a faraway land. They had been taken from their homes. There wasn't much hope, but then Isaiah begins to proclaim a new message. Isaiah began to proclaim a message that indeed there was hope and that they would be given an opportunity to start over, an opportunity to have a new beginning and a new future. Their cycle was coming near to a new beginning.

They would get their new beginning, by having a new king rise in the east of Babylon. After floundering under the rule of the Babylonians, the Persians were on their way to conquer the Babylonians. The Persians did conquer the Babylonians, and as a result the Persians set the Israelites free, so that they could have a new beginning. The Israelites were allowed to return home and begin fresh with a hope for the future and an opportunity to begin the future with the chance to make God center of their lives.

The story in Revelation follows a similar pattern. Revelation follows a period when the Christians were being persecuted and faced much hardship in being Christian. We don't today have a good conceptualization of what it would have been to be a Christian in the early period following Christ's life, but we know it would not have been the greatest experience. The Christians were struggling and some were leaving the faith because they could not handle the persecution. They had great aspirations as a Christian people, but things fell apart.

Revelation shows a story where there was hope in the beginning, but things turned very bad. But in the hardships present in the book, all of the plagues and torment there is hope. There is hope in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. The old earth, and all of the pain and hardships that were there, are gone and in the new heaven and the new earth there is no pain, no suffering, no death. It is a new creation that is far beyond anything on this earth. It is of the heavens, with God completely reigning over, with Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of a new beginning that is available for all people.

But the ultimate example of this cycle of hope, despair, and new beginning is found in the life of Jesus Christ. We just celebrated the beginning of Christ's life. In this beginning there was much hope, the hope of a new life for all of us, the hope of eternal life. We have learned that in the coming of the Christ child we see the opportunity for us to live life in a new way that goes beyond anything else we could imagine. We see a life filled with joy, with happiness, with healing. We have great anticipation for the new opportunity, much like we have at the beginning of a cycle in our life.

Yet in this hope, in this joy, in this opportunity, we know that there is some hardship coming. Jesus Christ was rejected by the powers of his day. He was pushed aside and called a heretic by the ruling elite. He was even executed by the government because he was considered to be a rebel. There was quite a bit to get

discouraged about, quite a bit to give up hope on. But the cycle does not end that way.

The cycle comes to hope once again. The cycle comes to hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the resurrection we see true hope, true life, a true new beginning. It is through the beginning of the resurrection that we have life, and life eternal.

So in this discourse, all the stories I have given, all the illustrations, I hope you see that indeed there is hope for us all. There is the opportunity for new beginning. The beginning of a new year is merely a point at which we can begin new life together, in the name of Jesus Christ.

This new year, take the opportunity to allow God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to be at the core of your life. When the joy of the beginning begins to fade and difficulties come your way, know that in the future a new beginning lies ahead, a beginning with hope. In Jesus Christ the end is never what it seems. It is always the beginning to hope. So in this New Year, a new opportunity, take hold that indeed Jesus Christ can transform your life. The time is now, so let us prayerfully consider placing God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit at the core of our lives. In Jesus Name, Amen.