

WHAT'S NEW?

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Genesis 3:17-24; Revelation 21:1-5a; 22-22:5

***“And the one who was seated on the throne said,
‘See, I am making all things new.’”***

Revelation 21:5a

Imagine you're walking down the aisle of your favorite supermarket, pushing your cart in front of you. Don't picture yourself squeezing cantaloupes in the produce section, nor reading a milk-carton label over by the dairy case. Think of yourself walking down those dry-goods aisles in the middle of the store. The shelves are chock-a-block with cans and boxes and colorful plastic bags.

Now, imagine how many of those packages have a single, three-letter word prominently displayed on the front. It's printed in bright, red letters, followed by an exclamation mark. That word is: “NEW!”

Check this out sometime: as a little experiment. Walk down the aisle and count how many packages have that bold word “NEW!” emblazoned across the front. Why, newness is busting out all over!

Is it really possible that all those formulations are new? Or did the R&D department of Kraft Foods or Nabisco just tweak them a little: to give the marketing people something to work with?

So... how effective is it? When you're standing there, making your purchase

decision, and you see two boxes — one that's business-as-usual and the other with that blazing word "NEW!" on the front — which one does your hand automatically reach for?

It's the one marked "new," right?

Isn't there a part of us that's always yearning for the new? It's human nature. We have an inborn appetite for novelty.

Sometimes that gets us into trouble. How many people do you know who've overextended their finances, borrowing a little too much to buy that new car: not because their old one no longer ran, but because they fancied the latest model? Or, how many have jumped a little too soon to take a new job, ending up in hot water a few months later, just because they wanted to re-invent themselves? More tragically, how many people do you know who have betrayed a spouse of many years, wounding a good and faithful person just because they wanted a little novelty in their love life? Hunger for the new is a mixed blessing.

In Revelation 21:5, God says, "See, I am making all things new." Well, what sort of newness is that?

Surely you know that Revelation is a mysterious book. The entire thing is a mystical vision. According to tradition, it was received by the apostle John at a time when the church was undergoing dreadful persecution at the hands of the

Romans. The Emperor Domitian had promised to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth. In order to reassure his people and encourage them to stand fast, John portrays a cosmic battle between good and evil.

Riding at the head of the angelic army on a white horse is none other than Jesus Christ: the very one the Romans crucified! His heavenly army vanquishes the forces of Satan, binding that fallen angel tightly with chains and casting him into a bottomless pit.

It's only then that "the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem" descends out of heaven. God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes; death... and mourning and crying and pain will be no more." When all this is accomplished, a voice issues from the heavenly throne: "See, I am making all things new."

I chose as the first reading this morning a little fragment from the book of Genesis. It comes from one of the first chapters of the Bible. Pair it up with today's reading from Revelation, and you've got a set of bookends.

When Revelation was written, its author very likely had these first chapters of Genesis in mind. It's as though he was constructing a bridge between the Old Testament and the New. We heard this morning about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. "Cursed is the ground because of you," says God to Adam. "In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it

shall bring forth for you.”

No more Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve can only look back from where they now are and see a squad of cherubim: not pudgy baby angels — as we so often imagine when we hear that word — but fearsome angelic warriors. Beside them stands a flaming sword, slowly rotating to block the road back. In the imagination of the biblical writers, that weapon would have been something like a 50-caliber machine gun today.

No, the Bible is unequivocal on this point: there is no way back to Paradise.

Although — and here is the good news — there is a way forward. There is a bridge between the ancient suffering and the future promise. There is a direct line that leads from the Garden of Eden to the promised city that has at its very center — and this is no accident, in Revelation — a verdant garden. In the center of that garden are two trees that are very familiar, from the Genesis text: the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life.

It's a long and difficult road — recall all that talk, in Genesis, about Adam and Eve toiling over the earth. Recall, too, the sufferings of their descendants: a deadly flood, Babel's curse of many languages, the enslavement of God's people in Egypt, wilderness wanderings, genocidal wars, exile in Babylon and then return; and then a succession of foreign overlords.

A brief moment of hope is the life of man claiming the title “Messiah”: but him they hung on a cross to die. Yes, there were some who said they saw him afterwards, raised from the dead, and that was glorious: but he did not walk long upon the earth after that. Then, the persecutions began: both of Jews and of Christians.

At the time Revelation is being written, the utter destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans is a recent memory. It was genocide, beyond all imagining. Literally, the historians said, the streets ran red with blood. And the massive foundation-stones of the Temple — blocks of stone so large, no one knew how the ancient builders had maneuvered them into place — were pulled down and scattered. All except for one wall: the Wailing Wall.

The Holy City Jerusalem is no more: The devastation is so complete, the destruction of the Temple so methodical that no one in John’s time can imagine it becoming a place of pilgrimage ever again.

Neither can John himself, it seems, nor can the author who wrote in his name: the writer of Revelation doesn’t even try. What he does offer is a vision far more glorious.

This heavenly city of the Revelation of John is unimaginably vast in its dimensions: 1500 miles in length, width and height. The city is made of solid gold,

and adorned with every sort of jewel. “And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.” [Revelation 21:21] (This is where, in the scriptures, the image of heaven’s “pearly gates” comes from.)

Yet that glorious image is not enough, it would seem: for the author continues, saying that not only have “the first heaven and the first earth” passed away, but the familiar celestial bodies of sun and moon as well:

“...the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.” [Revelation 21:23-25]

“There will be no night there.” No dark pall descending every twenty-four hours, to obscure all that’s good and beautiful. No fearful hours of oppressive darkness, as refugees huddle in alleyways, dreading the swords of brutish Legionnaires. No fiery lights of burning rooftops, either: for there is never any darkness in the sky over God’s city. The very city itself, in the prophet’s triumphant vision, is a great engine of eternal and inextinguishable light.

“See, I am making all things new!” That line sums up the message of Revelation in its entirety. “Trouble’s long, but hope is longer,” as the old spiritual puts it. The creator of heaven and earth is making all things new!

In order to get at what this saying means, let's proceed by a process of elimination. First let's first rule out some things it doesn't mean.

Not "All New Things"

Notice the Lord doesn't say, "See, I am making ALL NEW THINGS." All new things: that's the promise of the advertisers. They want us to believe, as we stroll the cereal aisle, that everything old belongs on the scrap heap.

God knows, in these days of ecological concern, we've got to start making do with what we have. This throwaway culture has got to stop, or else the planet as we know it — let alone our national prosperity — cannot survive. Somehow, we've got to see the value of things as they are, not as they're priced for sale.

That may sound like bad news on one level, but it's really good news. What if God really *did* say, "See I am making all new things"? Such planned obsolescence would refer to us as well: for surely we're God's creatures, too. It would mean God has decided to scrap everything — including us — and start over!

The Hebrew Scriptures record one occasion when God actually did this. It's the story of Noah, when the Lord destroyed the world with the waters of the flood. After that, God did make all new things — or, nearly all. In that story, only the occupants of the Ark survived.

The story of Noah has been called a “text of terror,” and with good reason!

Not Back Then

So, that’s the first thing this saying is not. The second thing God doesn’t say is: “I HAVE MADE all things new.” *I have made*: that’s the promise of the traditionalists, folks who are always looking backward, always saying life was better in the good old days.

Notice the verb in “I *am making* all things new.” It’s not past tense. Nor is it perfect tense, with everything completed and tied up in a neat little bundle. What he have here, instead, is the progressive tense.

The divine work of renewal is an ongoing work. It’s not yet completed. That work began in the days of the prophets, who discerned God was doing a new thing even in their own day. Yet, even those prophets foretold the coming of a new order in the distant future, that would arrive with the birth of the hoped-for Messiah.

We Christians, of course, believe Jesus is that Messiah. The Greek word *christos*, or “Christ,” literally means “anointed one.” The word so many of us assume must be Jesus’ last name is really just another word for Messiah.

Whenever we add “Christ” to “Jesus,” we’re effectively saying, “Jesus the Messiah.”

Yet, even as we apply that name to Jesus, we're still not claiming creation was all wrapped up and tied with a bow the moment Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus began a holy work during his earthly life, a work of reconciliation. That work continues today, by the power of his Holy Spirit. It will continue to unfold until that day when Christ returns, and all is brought to completion.

That means the voice of the traditionalists can never triumph in the church, if it is the true church of Jesus Christ. In a strong and faithful church, the leadership is always on the lookout for something new, always open to the fresh leading of the Spirit.

The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan is famous for this remark: "Tradition is the living faith of dead people; Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people." If our God is saying, "See, I am making all things new," then how can we possibly imagine a church that will forever stay the same?

Not Someday, Either

The third thing God isn't saying here is "I WILL MAKE all things new." *I will make*: that's the promise of every politician who ever ran for office. We all know about campaign promises: how the relentless, 24/7 pressure of the media all but forces candidates to promise the world to their constituents. Then, after they're elected, how could they possibly deliver on such extravagant promises?

We've watched, before, as the media has anointed one fresh-faced candidate or another as the Chosen One, a sort of secular messiah. Not even the greatest political leader — a truly gifted individual, an orator of rare ability — could ever be the savior of the world. That job's already filled.

The one who's filled it — Jesus the Christ — made some promises in his time, but he was about far more than that. During his earthly ministry, our Lord began to do things that were unmistakable signs of the reign of God breaking into this world. There's a famous incident in Matthew's Gospel when John the Baptist — who's by then in prison — sends some of his followers to quiz Jesus on what it is he's doing. Jesus sends John's emissaries back with this message:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”
[Matthew 11:4-5]

The work of the reign of God is well under way. In Romans 8:23, Paul speaks of “the first fruits of the Spirit.” The first fruits, of course, are the earliest produce of the harvest, a concrete sign of good things surely on their way.

The Holy Now

The work of Christ in this world is renewal. Renewal belongs neither to the storied past nor to the impossibly distant future. The “new thing” can only happen

in the present, in the here and now.

That, by the way, is the secret to making real changes in our lives. Where most of us get bogged down, in the self-improvement business, is in either the past or the future.

We do one of two things. Having decided on the change we need to make, we gaze back into the past and tote up just how long we've been engaging in that self-destructive behavior. Then, almost inevitably, we lose our nerve.

The other pitfall is to become too preoccupied with the future, saying, "I can quit any time." It's only in the present that we can achieve victory in a battle over self.

The folks from A.A. and other 12-step programs have a pretty good handle on this. One of their mottos is the famous, "One day at a time." A.A.'s founders learned, long ago, that the only way for a drunk to get sober is by relentlessly focusing on the present — and by accepting any help the "higher power" offers in the here and now.

"See, I am making all things new," declares the Lord. *All things*: not back then, not someday, but here and now.

It's as the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen — that Roman Catholic radio and TV preacher — wrote, years ago:

“Every moment comes to you pregnant with divine purpose.... Once it leaves your hands and your power to do with it as you please, it plunges into eternity to remain forever what you made it.”

The only thing any of us can do in this life is to seek the value of the present day God has given us. What you and I do on this day — not the past, not the future, but this day — can make all the difference. Let us, then, use today, and even this present moment, wisely. It is God’s gift to us, and when it passes by, it will never return.

What would it mean for you to live today, as much as you are able, as though that saying of God’s is true: “See, I am making all things new!”?

Let us pray:

**Lord of our yesterdays,
Lord of our tomorrows,
and, most of all, Lord of today:
save us from mourning the past that will never come again;
and save us from idle daydreams of an impossibly distant future.
Ground us, instead, in the present:
in the work we can do today for your sake;
in the love we can share for this earth and its children;
in the signs we can glimpse, even now, of a holy city yet to come. Amen.**