

“Into the Unknown”
delivered Sunday, January 3, 2010
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC
John 1:1-18

From time immemorial, the New Year has cast a powerful spell over the human imagination. Ancient peoples surrounded the observance of the New Year with diverse ceremonial occasions, including the reenactment of creation. The turn of the year constituted a return to the beginning of things, they believed, threatening a return of chaos, disorder, and darkness. So many solemn rituals endeavored to secure order, well-being, and divine favor as time passed from year to year. Anxiously but hopefully, the people waited for signs that the new beginning promised blessing, peace, and stability for one and all. In ancient Israel, the New Year seemed to have prompted the covenant community to renew its commitment to God and to keeping God’s commandments. An appraisal of one’s daily life and inner disposition gave voice to eager expectation. Sins were unburdened, symbolically placed on the head of a goat – the original scapegoat – and driven away to proclaim God’s power of forgiveness. Despite the uncertainty that stretched out ahead, the New Year has long stood before God’s people as a door of hope. They had only to open that door and enter the land of promise and plenty. (1) For us, too the coming of any New Year holds incredible promise, but it also conceals a measure of anxiety about the unknown, especially this New Year with another troop surge, as move through a season of escalating war abroad and continued economic insecurity at home.

In the middle of December, I had a little email exchange with my brother Edward, which turned out to be evidence that sibling rivalry never ends. Edward is the pragmatic one in my family, the conservative, the ever-grounded guardian for the rest of us. In an email exchange about family stuff and church work in the midst of funerals, a wedding, and what seemed back in mid-December like a gazillion worship services upcoming, I had made some comment about how December gets crazy for me, and he, a Vice President of the Federal Reserve Bank in Richmond, ever the practical one shot right back, “So the preacher business is "hectic" this time of year...just think about the bank supervision business in this economy and count your blessings!” (He’s also an Episcopalian – talking to me like that!) In the church, at the bank, at home, in whatever walk of life you find yourself, all of us arrive at the threshold of a New Year with combined feelings of anxiety and hope. Like an ancient people who reenacted the creation as a reminder of God’s bringing order to chaos, we do not know whether to rejoice freely or to quake in our boots, but we hope for a better year.

Back in my family’s Atlanta days, Celestine Sibley was a newspaper columnist, some of whose articles I saved over the years, including one that appeared in the paper on New Year’s Eve many years ago. Someone had called her saying, “Doesn’t a new year scare you to death? There must be a record number of suicides on New Year’s Day – people like me who can’t face it.” “It’s just another year,” Celestine Sibley mumbled. “Why are you scared of it?” “There’s still not a peaceful world,” the caller said. “Taxes are pure hell. People are dying of AIDS and cancer. Little children are starving. Our streets are dangerous. Do you like the coming year?” Celestine began her response with, “Now that you mention it...” and then stopped in mid-sentence and began again. “But the truth is that I do like the coming year. I feel very hopeful about it. A new year is one of the recurring miracles of our civilization. We can start over. We can do better...Hope is the key, I guess,” she wrote, “Some sage I read the other day said hope is the

belief that joy will come. And doesn't it always? People somewhere in the world will always be at war – if not nations, individuals. There will always be pain and suffering and death – but a wonderful number of people are working to defeat those things...The small joys that come in every life cushion us against despair...Of course," she added, "there are things to be afraid of. A child out at night in a car can make a craven coward of the most hopeful parent. You come closest to despair when you have somebody you love really ill. But a new day, a new year bring hope." Then Celestine Sibley reminded her readers how: Emily Dickinson wasn't a Pollyanna poet, but her lines about hope have always cheered her: Hope is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul,/And sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all. (2)

In this downtime after the climactic celebrations of Christmas, when we have to go back to whatever it is we go back to, on January 3rd, 2010, at the beginning of this new decade each of us, I suppose, has some element of anxiety and uncertainty, some even depression and despair. It is easy to see our lives, as well as all of history, as part of a repeating cycle of anticipation and disappointment, birth and death, excitement and let-down. But the antidote to all of that is the Christmas message God intends for us to carry into this New Year! Life is not a cycle. Neither is history cyclical. The birth of Jesus was a singular, purposeful event in human history. Because the Word became flesh and came to dwell among us, our lives have powerful new possibilities. God has come to us, and is like us, with us, for us. The great God of all creation appeared in the world amid the pains of labor and physical birth, was born into a family plagued with many troubles, and was soon exposed to the cruelty of a bloodthirsty ruler. The Son of God, an everyday human, born to an all-too-human lot. "John's concern is this unabridged humanity of the Christmas message, because with it the entire biblical understanding of God hangs together: there is no anonymous blind fate, no alien superpower, but rather one to whom nothing human is alien." (3)

The letter to the Hebrews put it this way: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word." What this means for us is that since God is revealed to us in the humanity of Jesus Christ, we can see God everywhere through our own human eyes. For those who face this New Year looking for direction that can hear Jesus' call, and follow him. For those in need of God's healing touch, Jesus will be a great healer, for others, the author of new life. For the oppressed Jesus will be the liberator, for those in high places, a servant leader. For some Jesus is mercy; for others courage. For some Jesus is victory; for others forgiveness and strength to try again. For some Jesus is hope for a spiritual journey; for others, the way home. Each of us sees in this Word made flesh the reflection of our own human need for God, and inevitably envision Jesus as the One who can meet us where we are, God in person, the Word made flesh. That is why Christians can stand at the threshold of this New Year and live into it with hope and joy, because we have such a fresh memory of the One who came to us in Bethlehem. So the good news for us is not just from all the recent polling data, that found 2009 such a bad year – with the recession, and job losses, and foreclosures, and all the rest – that 2010 has to be better than the year just passed. For believers who have come to see God in the person of Jesus Christ, it is always better than that. We meet each New Year with hope that the world is being transformed by the grace of God, and that the kingdom come in Jesus Christ is at hand.

It was with that hope, a school teacher penned these lines so appropriate to remember at the beginning of any New Year: "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness, and

put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.” (3)

In the coming of Jesus God did not banish all our darkness; God entered it to walk beside us wherever the journey leads. And since Jesus’ coming there is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the Light of God which even now shines in it. That Light, the Light of Christ himself, illumines the way forward – every step of the way. So each of us can say with confidence in Jesus Christ, “Happy New Year.” AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) James L. Crenshaw, “I Set Before You Life and Death,” Trembling at the Threshold of a Biblical Text, p. 106.
- 2) Celestine Sibley, “Despite evils, a new year is a fresh chance, Atlanta Journal Constitution, 12/31/95.
- 3) Jan Lochman, Cox Best Sermons, vol. 7, p. 93.
- 4) Hebrews 1:1-3.
- 5) Thanks to Kim Richter for this quote from a Memorial Service meditation celebrating the life of Lynn Carter.