

"Something New For New Year's"
Lamentations 3:22-26

December 31, 2012

New Year's Eve

We are a society that is in love with new things. Whether it is technology, education, worship, or some other area of our lives, we always think there is something new out there which will solve our problems and make life better for us. That is the reason some people get excited on this evening. We stand on the threshold of a new year. We wonder what new ideas, new technology, and new solutions will be developed in 2013 to solve our problems and make everything right.

When we review 2012, we see many problems that need fixing, many of which happened within the last month or two. There was Superstorm Sandy which devastated the northeastern part of our country. There is the so-called "fiscal cliff" – the economic disaster which Democrats and Republicans in Congress fight over but don't solve and which threatens our security in 2013. There was the pre-Christmas killings of 20 young children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CN.

We look at those problems and hope for some new solution. Perhaps some new technology will allow us to track storms and better prepare for them. Perhaps some new Congressional agreement can be reached which will insure our financial tranquility in the future. Perhaps new gun laws will prevent future acts of violence. Perhaps.

Any new technology, new law, or new act of Congress may have some temporary success. Yet often our "new" solutions to these problems fail much in the same way that the last new solutions failed.

The problem is that we are not dealing with new problems here. We have seen the same kinds of things in the past. Remember Hurricane Katrina? Remember the last "fiscal cliff" we faced? Remember Columbine? This suggests (and the Bible confirms) that we are not dealing with anything new under the sun. The things I have listed are not new problems. They are simply symptoms of a very old problem: sin.

The sin which Adam and Eve ushered into our world has corrupted everything it touches. Sin has corrupted the world which God created and declared to be “very good”. Therefore, we will always have so-called “natural” disasters (which are anything BUT natural in God’s plan). Sin has corrupted our social relationships. Therefore, we will always have political actions which conflict with the will of God and political inactions that hurt those who are governed. Worst of all, sin has corrupted people, the crowning jewel of God’s creation. Therefore, we will always have human beings who commit horrific acts.

All of us have experienced this sin individually in our lives during 2012. If you take the Word of God seriously – especially His Law, then you have had to deal with your guilt this past year for having done so much which God forbids and failing so often in doing all the good for your neighbor which God requires.

You likely have experienced some of the effects of sin in your life. Perhaps you’ve experienced financial setbacks or career difficulties. Maybe there has been a close relationship that has crumbled this past year. All of us have grown a year older and know of the aches and pains that come with that. Some have experienced serious illnesses this past year. Maybe the chief effect of sin – death – has come knocking on your family’s door during 2012.

What is the solution for this root cause of all pain and suffering in our lives? Is there some new and improved way of dealing with sin? Our text for tonight gives us the answer.

The book of Lamentations is a series of “laments” (songs of mourning) over what had happened to the people of Judah. As bad as you think you may have had it this past year, the year 586 BC was far worse for these people. The people had sinned and refused to listen to the call of the prophets to repent. So God allowed Babylon invade Judah and completely devastate the land. People from richest to poorest were killed in the siege of Jerusalem. Circumstances were so horrible when the city was surrounded by Babylonian troops that mothers were driven to eat their own

children to stay alive (Lamentations 220). Priests and prophets were killed in the temple which itself was ultimately destroyed. People who survived all of this were take back in exile to Babylon.

What would be the answer to such evil? What would be the solution to such sin? Surely there must be something newer and better than the people had been used to. But the prophet Jeremiah, who likely wrote this book, has a surprising answer. He says, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

How could Jeremiah say that? The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases? Hadn't the people's life experiences proven that it had? The “steadfast love of the Lord” of which Jeremiah speaks is God's covenantal love. In other words, the Lord had made a covenant – a promise to the people of Judah. He would never abandon them. They would always be His people. He would always deal with them in mercy. This punishment of Judah – the disciplining of God's people – did not change anything. The Lord would not break His promise, despite the sinfulness of the people. The Lord would not stop loving them, despite their refusal to repent. The Lord would not destroy His people. He would save them.

Thus, in the midst of this suffering, Jeremiah was still able to write, “His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” There is the new thing – the Lord's mercy, right? Not at all. The Lord's mercy had never ended, despite the bad things that had happened to the people. The Hebrew word for “new” can mean “fresh”. In the midst of their sufferings, when things really seemed bleak, the Lord's mercy which had always been there for them suddenly became fresh.

This mercy sustained them after the destruction of their country and the exile of their people. It led them to repentance. It gave them forgiveness. The Lord's mercy did not give them quick relief from the consequences of their sin. They would remain in exile. However, Jeremiah writes this promise, “The Lord is my portion, ‘ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the

salvation of the Lord.” The people did wait in hope and in faith. Seventy years later, the Lord freed them from captivity, brought them back to their country, and restored the temple.

What does that have to do with us? As we experience the effects of sin in our lives and, perhaps, for our refusal to repent, let us not look for some new and improved solution to our problems. Instead, look back, as our sermon hymn did, to the solution which was prophesied of old, “ere the worlds began to be”, the baby born in a manger, the son of God, Jesus Christ.

God made a promise to humanity in our sin and suffering that He would rescue us from that. Jesus fulfilled that promise. Jesus stood in for us. He led a perfect life in our place and fulfilled the Law for us. He accepted the punishment for our sins by dying on the cross and won forgiveness for all our sins. Jesus conquered death for us by rising from the grave to new life and brought life and immortality to light for us.

God made a promise to each of us in Holy Baptism. He gave us Jesus’ holiness. He forgave us for Jesus’ sake. He brought into existence a whole new life for us through Jesus’ resurrection – a life that sin, Satan, suffering, and even death cannot destroy. We are no longer His enemies that He may someday be destroy, but we have become His beloved children and heirs of eternal life. And, as with the people of Judah, God never breaks His promise.

His mercy is new for us every morning, not in the sense that it wasn’t there before, but, when we consider our situation in life according to it, rather than according to the empty promises and ineffective solutions which the world offers, His mercy becomes fresh for us. No matter what sin we have committed or how often we have committed; no matter what guilt and shame that sin brings; we return to our baptism and begin each day new “to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

No matter how our world looks out there in terms of evil, violence, suffering, and uncertainty, we come to the Lord’s Table to feast on His body and blood, not only for the forgiveness of our sins but as a foretaste of the feast to come – “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9) We find

ourselves not only comforted but encouraged. Regardless of what happens in the new year, good or bad, we confess along with Jeremiah, “The Lord is my portion, ‘ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.” Like the people of Judah, we “wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” We have assurance in time of disaster, comfort in time of tragedy, and hope in time of death. We know that the the Lord who kept His promise to the people of Judah will keep His promise to us, save us from sin, death, and hell, and bring us to our eternal home in heaven.

As we enter into 2013 looking for the newest technology, newest, ideas, and newest solutions to keep us safe and deliver us, let us remember that new is not always different and different is not always better. Look to the past so that you are ready for the future. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Thanks be to God! Amen.