

December 31, 2006
Jeremiah 31:7-14, John 1:1-18
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"Old Endings and New Beginnings"

I come to the end of a year with conflicted feelings.

On one hand, I wonder why we make such a fuss over the New Year. The end of one calendar year and the beginning of another is simply a human measurement imposed on time. Human beings have used all sorts of calendars to record the passage of time. According to the Gregorian calendar, the New Year starts tomorrow, but it could start at any time. If we followed the Mayan calendar or the old Chinese calendar, we wouldn't be talking today about the end or the beginning of the year. Even the church calendar does not see today as the beginning of anything new. In the liturgical calendar, the church year begins each year on the First Sunday of Advent and ends on Christ the King Sunday in late November. It wasn't until 1752 that the American colonies switched from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. Therefore in 1752, Wednesday, September 2, 1752, was followed by Thursday, September 14, 1752. Eleven days simply vanished - at least as the calendar records them! Today, the Gregorian is the most universally accepted calendar in the world. So, here we are on New Year's Eve 2006, facing the end of one calendar year and the beginning of another.

In many ways, one day is like another. As the teacher in Ecclesiastes says, "A generation goes, and a generation comes... what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." (1:4, 9). From one perspective, it doesn't mean anything except a good excuse to make some lists of famous people, favorite songs, notable deaths and newsworthy events. It's a good excuse to throw an extravagant party, get weepy and sentimental, kiss a near stranger and make some resolutions that we are unlikely to keep.

From another perspective, I am grateful for this day, because it is a time to look back over the past year in light of the word of God. In the past year, have we somehow glimpsed eternity in a moment in time? This is a day to think about how our lives intersect with the life of God. It is a time to think about old endings and new beginnings.

It seems appropriate to end the old year with this word from God about the beginning of all things and the movement of God into time and space. John begins his gospel by reaching all the way back to the very beginning of time. Actually, he reaches back before the beginning of time when there was only God. John says: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He was in the beginning with God. We hear in his words an echo of the opening of the creation story in the book of Genesis, where we hear the same phrase, "In the beginning, God..." Only this time, John speaks of the divine Word or logos. The Hebrews understood the Word of God as the Word spoken in creation that brings life into being. The Word goes out to accomplish the purposes of God.

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. To the Hebrew people, the logos of God is the creative, active presence of God in the world. The Greeks understood the logos as the divine principle behind all things that causes all things to be. To Greek philosophers, the logos is the principle of reason and order in the universe. The logos is the uncreated God through whom all things are made. Or, as John says, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being..."

John goes even further to identify the logos with the very being of God. The climax comes when John proclaims the incarnation: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth." (1:1-3, 14)

We live our lives in time and space. God, who lives beyond time and space, comes to us in the incarnate Word and dwells with us. In ordinary human flesh, we see the glory of God. John's poetry falls on us like a fresh spring rain waters the ground. Like the earth, we simply absorb the Word before we understand its mysterious power. Like the rain, the Word brings life to all.

This is the same God about whom Jeremiah spoke. This God brings life to the scattered people. God says, "Life shall become like a watered garden, and the people shall never languish again." (31:12) In Jeremiah's prophecy, God is pictured as a savior who delivers the people from bondage in exile and brings them home; he is the father who provides for the needs of his beloved children; he is the shepherd who tenderly cares for his sheep. The essential difference is that, in John's gospel, the savior, the father and the shepherd become a human being and dwells among us bringing life to all.

On this New Year's Eve, when we think about the passage of time and the meaning of our lives, we can think like the teacher in Ecclesiastes that all time is the same and that there is nothing new under the sun. We can live as if one day is like another and one generation simply passes into another. Or, we take this time to see the new beginning that God makes for all creation in the gift of the only begotten son, Jesus. It is the incarnation, God assuming human flesh, that gives time and existence meaning. John declares that to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God.

On New Year's, we take time to rake through our experiences of the past year like we might rake up a pile of leaves. To some, the leaves are unimportant. They are damp and troublesome. They take too many bags to fill and cause too many blisters and too much back pain. One leaf is like another. You and I might see things differently. We might enjoy the rhythmic sound of the rake pulling through the grass. We catch sight of the leaves as they are lifted by the rake and the air. We see their deep autumnal colors and varied shapes. We feel their texture in our hands. All those earthy colors and that fragile beauty last for only a season. It is God who makes the leaves grow, turn color, fall and decay. It is God who makes them beautiful.

It is God who makes our lives beautiful and fills them with truth and grace. Some fail to see it. Others catch sight of how this incarnate God intersects our lives in time. In her

reflection on her own life of faith, entitled "Leaving Church," the Episcopal priest and well-known preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes about how she caught sight of the Divine Presence in her life. As a child growing up in Kansas, she loved the outdoors: the perfumed prairie grass, the chirping grasshoppers, crows, the tree frogs and the drainage ditch that seemed to her to be a crystal stream. Nature was her first cathedral. As she did not grow up in church or in a family that talked about faith, she had no language to describe her encounters with the Holy Presence of God. It was not until she was seven years old and went to church for the first time that she began to discover the language of faith that made sense of the Presence she was experiencing in her life but could not name. Over the years, she learned that this incarnate God invades the creation, inhabits human life and fills the created world and human experiences with glory. In raking through her life, she came to see that you cannot easily separate divine words from human words and holy moments from ordinary human experiences. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Taylor writes, "God uses whatever is usable in a life, both to speak and to act, and those who insist on fireworks in the sky may miss the electricity that sparks the human heart." (p. 26.)

On this New Year's Eve, we can simply throw away the old calendar and hang up the new one with a sigh about how quickly time passes. Or, we can see in our lives the "electricity that sparks the human heart." As we pause to look at our lives over the past year, may we see more than the ending of the seasons, the months and the days. May we see where God's presence was among us and within us making each moment of time holy and our life "like a watered garden." John says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." The holy presence of the incarnate God in time and space fills our days with life. Some old things may be ending, but God gives us new beginnings full of grace and truth.