“NEW YEAR’S REVOLUTIONS”

ALL FAMILIES HAVE TRADITIONS – ESPECIALLY HOLIDAY TRADITIONS – THOSE THINGS THAT MAKE THE HOLIDAY FEEL MORE SPECIAL – THINGS WITHOUT WHICH IT JUST WOULDN’T FEEL RIGHT.

ONE OF THE CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS OF OUR FAMILY THAT HAS HELD TRUE FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS IS FOR ME TO SAY THAT IT JUST DOESN’T FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS UNTIL I HEAR SOMEONE SAY, “IT JUST DOESN’T FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR.”

ONCE I’VE HEARD THAT, I’M FINALLY ABLE TO BE IN A FESTIVE MOOD FOR THE HOLIDAY.

THIS YEAR, I CAME PRECARIOUSLY CLOSE TO MISSING OUT ON THAT FESTIVE MOOD – UNTIL CHRISTMAS EVE.
I RECEIVED A TEXT FROM OUR SON, DREW.

IT CONTAINED NINE WORDS – WORDS THAT TOLD
ME DREW REMEMBERED OUR TRADITION & WAS
SOMEHOW AWARE OF MY PREDICAMENT.

THE TEXT READ, “DAD, IT JUST DOESN’T FEEL LIKE
CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR.”

WHEW! THAT WAS MID-AFTERNOON ON
CHRISTMAS EVE!

TO BE HONEST, THOUGH, THIS YEAR REALLY
DIDN’T FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS – OR, AT LEAST, IT
SEEMED LIKE AN ODD CHRISTMAS.

CHRISTMAS FALLING ON MONDAY SEEMED EVEN
ODDER THAN LAST YEAR WHEN IT FELL ON SUNDAY.

SO, TOO, FOR NEW YEAR’S DAY.
NEW YEAR’S DAY ON MONDAY AND, THEREFORE, NEW YEAR’S EVE ON SUNDAY JUST SEEMS RATHER STRANGE.

Perhaps I feel that way because of what it does to the church calendar.

This is really the first Sunday after Christmas and the lectionary gospel reading for today is the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple & the response of two individuals – Simeon & Anna – who recognize the incredible nature of the child being brought by Mary & Joseph.

The day of Epiphany – our traditional time to focus on the visit of the wise men – will be this Saturday, January 6.
BUT THEN, NEXT SUNDAY IS THE DAY THAT IS SET ASIDE AS BAPTISM OF THE LORD SUNDAY, SO WE DON’T REALLY HAVE AN EPIPHANY SUNDAY.

BUT, AS STRANGE AS IT ALL SEEMS, THIS YEAR’S CALENDAR PRESENTS US WITH AN OPPORTUNITY THAT WE DON’T USUALLY HAVE.

ORDINARILY, WE ARE HERE ON A SUNDAY THAT FALLS A FEW DAYS BEFORE OR A FEW DAYS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW YEAR.

IT SOMETIMES FEELS EITHER TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE TO FOCUS ON WHAT WE TRADITIONALLY LABEL “NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS.”

NOT THIS YEAR.

THIS YEAR, THIS DAY – WE FIND OURSELVES RIGHT ON THE CUSP OF IT.
TOMORROW IS THE BEGINNING OF A BRAND NEW
MONTH & A BRAND NEW YEAR.

ONE OF THE SUGGESTED READINGS FOR NEW
YEAR’S EVE IS THE PASSAGE WE’VE READ THIS
MORNING FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION.

THAT’S WHERE I’D LIKE US TO FOCUS THIS
MORNING, INSTEAD OF THE STORY OF SIMEON AND
ANNA OR THE STORY OF THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN.

THIS IS A PASSAGE THAT SPEAKS CLEARLY ABOUT
NEW THINGS.

IT’S A PASSAGE THAT IS ONE OF THE MOST WELL-
KNOWN PASSAGES IN THE ENTIRE BOOK OF
REVELATION.

AND WHILE IT MAY BE WELL-KNOWN, I DON’T
THINK IT IS WELL-UNDERSTOOD.
THIS PASSAGE REALLY FLIES IN THE FACE OF THINGS WE TRADITIONALLY HAVE COME TO BELIEVE.

IN LOOKING AT THESE WORDS OF JOHN IN REVELATION, I THINK THEY OFFER US PROFOUND GUIDELINES FOR – NOT NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS – BUT RATHER NEW YEAR’S REVOLUTIONS.

THEY ARE, INDEED, REVOLUTIONARY WORDS THAT JOHN SPEAKS.

MORE PRECISELY, THEY ARE REVOLUTIONARY WORDS THAT GOD SPEAKS BECAUSE, UNLIKE MOST OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION, THESE AREN’T JOHN’S WORDS BUT GOD’S.

WHAT GOD SAYS HERE THAT IS SO INCREDIBLY REVOLUTIONARY – WHAT GOD TELLS US IN THIS PASSAGE THAT FLIES AGAINST EVERYTHING WE’VE
COME TO BELIEVE – IS THAT HEAVEN IS GOING TO COME TO US INSTEAD OF US GOING TO HEAVEN.

TELL ME THAT’S NOT A REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT!

BUT IT’S RIGHT THERE IN THESE WORDS WE’VE READ THIS MORNING!

FIRST, WE HAVE JOHN SETTING THE STAGE.

HE SAYS, “THEN I SAW A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH...AND I SAW THE HOLY CITY...COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN...”

AND THEN, TO CONFIRM WHAT JOHN HAS SAID, WE HEAR A VOICE FROM THE THRONE SAY, “SEE, THE HOME OF GOD IS AMONG MORTALS. HE WILL DWELL WITH THEM AS THEIR GOD...”

CONTRARY TO POPULAR APOCALYPTIC THINKING, THERE IS NO RAPTURE – NO CHRISTIANS
BEING SNATCHED FROM EARTH & TRANSPORTED TO HEAVEN.

INSTEAD, IT IS GOD WHO IS “RAPTURED” DOWN TO EARTH TO TAKE UP RESIDENCE AMONG US!

THAT UNDERSTANDING MAKES THIS AN EXTRAORDINARILY APPROPRIATE PASSAGE FOR THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

GOD COMING TO EARTH TO TAKE UP RESIDENCE AMONG US IS PRECISELY WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT.

IT’S THE INCARNATION THAT WE TALKED ABOUT ON CHRISTMAS EVE – GOD BEING BORN IN HUMAN FLESH IN THE PERSON OF JESUS OF NAZARETH WHO IS IMMANUEL – “GOD WITH US.”

BOTH OF THESE IDEAS ARE INCREDIBLY REVOLUTIONARY.
THE IDEA OF GOD LIVING AS A REAL PERSON AT A REAL TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY IS REALLY BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION.

EQUALLY REVOLUTIONARY & INCOMPREHENSIBLE IS THE IDEA OF GOD USHERING HEAVEN TO EARTH.

YOU MAY REMEMBER A BELINDA CARLISLE SONG FROM THE ‘80’S THAT INCLUDES THE LINE – “THEY SAY IN HEAVEN LOVE COMES FIRST – WE’LL MAKE HEAVEN A PLACE ON EARTH.”

I’M PRETTY SURE BELINDA CARLISLE DIDN’T HAVE THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN MIND WHEN SHE PENNED THOSE WORDS & YET THEY APPLY TO THIS PASSAGE NEVERTHELESS.

THIS REVOLUTIONARY IDEA OF HEAVEN ON EARTH IS THRILLING TO CONSIDER.
AND IT’S HERE IN THIS PASSAGE THAT WE FIND THOSE WORDS THAT BRING SUCH COMFORT TO US IN A TIME OF SORROW OR GRIEF WHEN THE VOICE FROM THE THRONE SAYS, “HE WILL WIPE EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES. DEATH WILL BE NO MORE; MOURNING AND CRYING AND PAIN WILL BE NO MORE…”

AND THEN, THAT SAME VOICE SAYS, “SEE, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW!”

REMEMBER – THIS ISN’T SOME FARAWAY PIE-IN-THE-SKY KIND OF PLACE – THIS IS RIGHT HERE ON EARTH – RIGHT IN THE VERY PLACE THAT GOD HAS CHosen TO DWELL!

YES – THIS IS A REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT THAT GOD IS COMING TO MAKE THINGS BRAND NEW!
WHAT’S IMPORTANT ABOUT THIS, THOUGH, IS THAT THE BOOK OF REVELATION ISN’T THE ONLY PLACE WE READ WORDS LIKE THESE.

ALL THROUGH SCRIPTURE WE FIND GOD DOING A NEW THING.

THROUGH THE PROPHET ISAIAH, GOD SAYS,

“REMEMBER NOT THE FORMER THINGS, NOR CONSIDER THE THINGS OF OLD. BEHOLD, I AM DOING A NEW THING.”

THROUGH THE PROPHET EZEKIEL, GOD SAYS, “I WILL GIVE THEM A NEW HEART AND I WILL PUT A NEW SPIRIT WITHIN THEM.”

THE APOSTLE PAUL SAYS TO THE CORINTHIANS, “THE OLD HAS PASSED AWAY; BEHOLD, ALL THINGS ARE NEW.”
THESE ARE GOOD WORDS TO HEAR AT THE END OF AN OLD YEAR AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ONE. THEY ARE WORDS THAT ASSURE US THAT GOD IS MORE CONCERNED ABOUT OUR FUTURE THAN HE IS ABOUT OUR PAST.

THAT’S THE POINT OF ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF OUR WEEKLY WORSHIP HERE AT EASTMINSTER – OUR CONFESSION OF SIN AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE ASSURANCE OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS.

THAT’S WHY WE FOLLOW IT UP EACH WEEK WITH THE GLORIA PATRI – SINGING GLORY TO GOD FOR THE ASSURANCE OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS – THE PROMISE THAT GOD IS MORE CONCERNED ABOUT OUR FUTURE THAN OUR PAST.
EVERY MOMENT WE EXPERIENCE GOD’S FORGIVENESS WE ARE GIVEN A NEW BEGINNING – A NEW START ON THE FUTURE THAT GOD HOLDS BEFORE US.

LET’S GO BACK, THOUGH, TO THIS REVOLUTIONARY IDEA OF HEAVEN COMING TO EARTH INSTEAD OF US GOING TO HEAVEN.

WHEN GOD TELLS US THAT HEAVEN IS GOING TO BE HERE & THAT GOD IS GOING TO USHER IN THAT ETERNAL KINGDOM RIGHT WHERE WE LIVE, WE’RE ALSO BEING TOLD THAT WE HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY.

HERE AGAIN, WE FIND PASSAGES GALORE THAT SUPPORT SUCH AN UNDERSTANDING.

GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO GENESIS AND WE FIND GOD INVOLVING ABRAHAM & SARAH IN THE DIVINE PLAN FOR THE WORLD.
AND THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN GOD’S PLAN IS SPELLED OUT IN THIS PASSAGE WE’VE READ THIS MORNING.

WE HAVE A PLACE IN GOD’S PLAN TO USHER IN A NEW KINGDOM ON THIS EARTH.

AGAIN, THIS IS A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA, BUT IT’S RIGHT THERE IN GOD’S WORD!

AND IT’S APPROPRIATE FOR US TO CONNECT OUR OWN PERSONAL ROLE IN THAT PLAN WHEN WE CONSIDER OUR OWN NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS – OR, NEW YEAR’S REVOLUTIONS BECAUSE THE PLAN OF GOD IS REVOLUTIONARY!

FOR MOST OF US, MAKING NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS IS, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY.
I SAW A POLL THAT WAS TAKEN JUST THIS PAST WEEK THAT LISTED THE TOP 10 NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS PEOPLE ARE MAKING THIS YEAR.

I FOUND IT INTERESTING THAT THE CHURCH CAN PLAY A ROLE IN AT LEAST HALF OF THEM.

HERE ARE THE 5 FROM THAT TOP 10 LIST THAT STRUCK ME AS HAVING RELEVANCE TO THE CHURCH–

*DO MORE GOOD DEEDS.*

*LEARN SOMETHING NEW.*

*DO MORE EXCITING THINGS.*

*MAKE BETTER FINANCIAL DECISIONS.*

*FOCUS ON SELF-IMPROVEMENT.*

IF ANY OF THOSE HAPPEN TO BE NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS YOU’RE CONSIDERING MAKING THIS YEAR, I DON’T THINK YOU NEED ANY COMMENTARY
AT ALL TO REALIZE THE ROLE THE CHURCH CAN PLAY IN EVERY ONE OF THEM.

LET ME SUGGEST ANOTHER RESOLUTION, THOUGH – ONE THAT WASN’T ON THAT TOP TEN LIST – ONE THAT CAN PERHAPS TIE A WHOLE LOT OF THINGS TOGETHER.

IT’S A RESOLUTION THAT CAN GIVE SUBSTANCE TO THE WAY IN WHICH GOD CALLS US TO PARTNER WITH HIM IN A REVOLUTIONARY WAY IN BRINGING HEAVEN TO EARTH.

IT’S A RESOLUTION THAT CAN CONNECT OUR DIVERGENT SCRIPTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR TODAY.

LET ME URGE YOU TO RESOLVE TO DO SOMETHING THAT IS DESPERATELY NEEDED IN THE WORLD TODAY – PERHAPS MORE THAN IT’S EVER BEEN NEEDED BEFORE.
LET ME URGE YOU TO RESOLVE TO TRULY LISTEN WITH AN OPEN MIND TO THOSE WHOSE VIEWS HAPPEN TO BE DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN.

I THINK THAT COULD GO A LONG WAY TO PARTNERING WITH GOD IN A REVOLUTIONARY WAY TO BRING HEAVEN TO EARTH.

YOU MAY REMEMBER THE “CALVIN & HOBBES” COMIC STRIP THAT UNFORTUNATELY IS NO LONGER IN SYNDICATION.

CALVIN WAS NAMED FOR THE EMINENT THEOLOGIAN JOHN CALVIN & HOBBES FOR THE RENOWNED PHILOSOPHER THOMAS HOBBES & THE COMIC EXPLORED GREAT THEOLOGICAL & PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES.
IN A COMIC FOR NEW YEAR’S EVE A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, HOBBES ASKS CALVIN, “DID YOU MAKE ANY RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR?”

CALVIN GOES ON A TIRADE, SHOUTING, “NO! I’M FINE JUST THE WAY I AM! WHY SHOULD I CHANGE? IN FACT, I THINK IT’S HIGH TIME THE WORLD STARTED TO CHANGE TO SUIT ME!

I DON’T SEE WHY I SHOULD DO ALL THE CHANGING AROUND HERE.

IF THE NEW YEAR REQUIRES RESOLUTIONS, I SAY IT’S UP TO EVERYBODY ELSE, NOT ME! I DON’T NEED TO IMPROVE!

EVERYBODY ELSE DOES!”

CALVIN FINALLY TAKES A BREATH & ASKS, “HOW ABOUT YOU? DID YOU MAKE ANY RESOLUTIONS?”
WITH A FLABBERGASTED LOOK ON HIS FACE, HOBBES SAYS, “WELL, I HAD RESOLVED TO BE LESS OFFENDED BY HUMAN NATURE, BUT I THINK I BLEW IT ALREADY!”

THOUGH THAT COMIC APPEARED ON NEW YEAR’S EVE MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO, IS IT NOT EVEN MORE APPROPRIATE FOR NEW YEAR’S EVE, 2017?

SIMPLY LISTENING TO ONE ANOTHER – ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO HAVE DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, DIFFERENT BELIEFS & DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS – CAN GO A LONG WAY TOWARD PARTNERING WITH GOD TO MAKE HEAVEN ON EARTH A REALITY.

AND THEN THERE ARE THOSE DIVERGENT PASSAGES & OBSERVANCES FOR THIS DAY.
ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, WHEN WE READ ABOUT MARY & JOSEPH PRESENTING JESUS IN THE TEMPLE, THE RIGHTEOUS OLD MAN SIMEON TOOK THE BABY IN HIS ARMS AND SAID, “MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION, WHICH YOU HAVE PREPARED IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL PEOPLES, A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES...”

ALL PEOPLE – EVEN THE GENTILES – THAT’S EVERYONE.

“FROM THE EAST…” IS MATTHEW’S WAY OF TELLING US THEY WEREN’T JEWISH.

THEY WEREN’T KINSMEN OF MARY & JOSEPH.

THEY WERE DIFFERENT.

THEY WERE FROM A DIFFERENT LAND, A DIFFERENT RACE, A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE & THEY, NO DOUBT, HELD DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE WORLD.

AND YET GOD SPOKE TO THEM & THEY ANSWERED GOD’S CALL.

YES, WHATEVER OTHER NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS YOU’RE MAKING THIS YEAR – AND PERHAPS THEY INCLUDE SOME OF THOSE POPULAR ONES THAT CAN EASILY CONNECT TO THE CHURCH – I HOPE YOU’LL MAKE A RESOLUTION – OR A REVOLUTION – IN YOUR HEART TO TRULY LISTEN TO THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM YOU & THOSE
WHO HOLD DIFFERENT BELIEFS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE WORLD.

I MENTIONED “CALVIN & HOBBES.”


CALVIN’S FINAL WORDS TO HOBBES ARE – “…A BRAND NEW YEAR! A FRESH, CLEAN START! A DAY FULL OF POSSIBILITIES! IT’S A MAGICAL WORLD, HOBBES, OLE BUDDY!”

SO IT IS.

THANKFULLY, OUR GOD IS A GOD OF A FRESH, CLEAN START!

EVERY DAY IS A DAY FULL OF POSSIBILITIES IN THIS MAGICAL & REVOLUTIONARY NEW WORLD!

AMEN.

The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport  Eastminster Presbyterian Church  Evansville, Indiana