

THE MYSTERY OF NEWNESS

EPHESIANS 3:1-12

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

JANUARY 5, 2014/2ND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS/EPIPHANY

I wasn't quite sure how to approach this first Sunday of a New Year.

Most of the time, I prefer to follow the Christian calendar, to let the narrative of the life of Jesus shape the texts I choose and how I preach.

We are the borderline between the end of Christmas and Epiphany (Epiphany is technically tomorrow, 12 days after Christmas). So that would mean an Epiphany sermon where we looked at the presentation of Jesus to the Magi, the prophecy from Isaiah on the nations of the earth bringing gifts to commemorate the shining light of Israel.

But today I don't want to focus specifically on Epiphany (even if Epiphany themes will emerge). I want to focus on the ordinary, secular calendar—the calendar that governs most of our days to a greater extent than the Christian calendar (even if it shouldn't).

Today is, again, the first Sunday of 2014 and, for many of us, newness is on our minds. New years mean new beginnings.

This week I came across countless articles talking with advice for the New Year.

Ten steps to keeping your New Years resolutions...

Ten things to avoid this year if I want to be successful...

Ten things to read this year to be in the know...

Ten books I should have read last year...

(So many tens!)

Trends to watch for in the year ahead, how to lose weight, gain control, and generally become everything I want to be...

After a while I got exhausted just reading about all the hope and promise of a New Year!

Why do we locate so much hope around the changing of a number on a calendar?

Well, I think part of the reason is because we have such a hunger for change, for something different, for a break from the same old same-old. We long to see things improve, to achieve victory over unhealthy habits, to become the kind of people we would like to be.

And yet, many of us have seen enough new years come and go to know that swapping a number on our calendars doesn't magically make us more disciplined virtuous, consistently loving people, nor does it magically make our world a better place.

Many of us have tried and failed too many times to make meaningful changes in our lives, and have grown weary of failure.

Many of us know that new years don't stay new for very long.

And perhaps some of us even secretly (or not so secretly) wonder if newness is even possible. We rehearse well-worn words about new beginnings and a God of surprises, but deep down we suspect that they're not really true.

We have seen too much of pain and loss, too much of weariness and struggle, too much of plain old ordinary everyday ups and downs to really believe that there could be anything radically new or hopeful on the horizon.

This doesn't describe all of us, to be sure, but I think it describes some of us. I know that I feel this way sometimes! We *talk* about newness and change, but we don't really *expect* it. We know ourselves and our world too well for that.

I don't know how you are feeling as 2014 begins, but I want us to together read Ephesians 3 as a kind of manifesto of newness on this first Sunday of 2014.

Our text today begins with these words:

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus...”

It is obvious that we are beginning in the middle of a longer conversation.

(Chapter divisions in Scripture are not always helpful as they break up passages that were meant to be connected.)

So, whenever we come across a text that seems to be beginning in the middle of a longer conversation, it's important to have a look at what came before. This is especially true when we are reading a *letter*, which the book of Ephesians is. It's a letter, written by Paul, to a church comprised mostly of non-Jewish members in the city of Ephesus.

So, let's back up to Ephesians 2 to see if we can discover what the “this” that Paul begins chapter 3 with is referring to.

Ephesians 2 breaks up nicely into two sections.

The first section (Eph. 2:1-10) is all about the **transition from death to life**. Paul talks about how all of us once lived according to the passions of the flesh and were far from God.

And then, two words: “But God...”

But God, who was rich in mercy, and out of great love for *all of us* (Jew and non-Jew), **made us alive together with Christ!**

Alive. Together.

By the grace of God we have all, together, been saved by faith, Paul says. Not because of anything we have done or could do, but simply because God is rich in mercy and because God loves us.

The section ends with these beautiful words in Eph. 2:10 — “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (NRSV).

So, death to life. All of us. Together. By the grace and mercy of God.

On to section two (Eph. 2:11-22) in the pre-conversation.

The second section focuses specifically on the inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of God's covenant promises to Israel.

Paul is blunt here, and his words sound harsh to our ears.

He tells the Gentiles to remember the way things were. Listen to the language Paul uses to describe them: you were once...

- "aliens"
- "without Christ"
- "strangers to the covenants of promise"
- "without hope"
- "without God"

And then in verse 13, we see this important word again: "But."

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Instead of two groups, there is now one. One body.

The same Jesus proclaimed peace to those who were far off (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews).

There is no more stranger, no more alien. All have been welcomed in; all have access to God.

The old, old promises from Isaiah and the prophets—promises about all the Gentiles coming to the light of Israel—have been fulfilled, but in a very surprising way.

God himself, laying down his life for all. Because of mercy. Because of love. For all.

God himself, bringing peace to all people and creating one community of former enemies to proclaim this story to the world.

And so *this* is the “this” that our Scripture reading this morning is referring to.

This is the good news that Paul has given his life to proclaim, the reason he endured hardship and imprisonment (he’s in prison when he writes this letter to the Ephesians) and ridicule and persecution wherever he went.

This is, according to Ephesians 3, the mystery of Christ, the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things...

That the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, sharers in the promise Christ Jesus through the gospel.

What a remarkable statement!

Christians often understand the mystery of Christ in very individualistic terms. We think of the mystery that God would become a human being like us or the mystery of individual forgiveness and salvation or the mystery of the empty tomb opening the door to eternal life after we die.

But for Paul, the mystery of Christ is that God’s embrace is wide—far wider than many people in the first century would have dared imagine, or would have even *wanted* to imagine.

For Paul, the mystery is that God was in Christ reconciling human beings to each other, breaking down old, old walls of division, and creating *one new humanity* that collectively shares in the promise of God.

This is something utterly new, something utterly unexpected.

In a world that was much like ours, where people were tribalistic and imagined that the gods were too, in a world where many people imagined that the gods were capricious or spiteful, the idea that the one true God would give himself away for the sake of mercy and love for all people, is astonishingly *new* and astonishingly *good* news.

So, we have this story of newness here at the outset of a new year.

What do we do with it? Is it just an old story that happened a long time ago? Or does it invite us into possibilities, all these years later?

Does it tell us the way things *were* for people long ago, or the way things *are* for us today?

It seems to me that there are two ways that we usually go when confronted by opportunities for newness, whether it is the flipping of a calendar year, or it is a text of newness like the one from Ephesians.

1. We default to grace

We think, “Well, I’m never going to be able to make the changes I would like to, the church is never going to live up to Paul’s ideal in Ephesians... thank God for grace!” We despair of change and settle into a kind of mushy gratitude that God just accepts us as we are.

We default to the path of least resistance, kind of assuming that our behaviour is already determined by a combination of genetics, upbringing, and our social environment, and exult in the fact that God makes up the difference.

2. Works

We double our efforts and try and try and try to do better. We think that if we just work hard enough, we can make it happen.

I read an article this week from *Cracked* that was viewed by something like 12 million people. The basic point of the article was that you are what you can do. Nobody cares about your character. The world is only interested in you to the extent that you fill some need that needs meeting.

The author even quotes *Jesus* – the axe is at the root of the tree so you’d better bear fruit!

For Christians, this mentality goes something like this: “Jesus came and showed us how to live and gave us a list of things to do: love enemies, make peace, pursue justice, deny yourselves, etc.

This is *kind of* true, but it can very easily slide into believing that we have to earn the love of God by being like Jesus.

It can very easy turn from news of liberation into a new kind of enslavement.

I've been tempted toward both of these approaches. Sometimes on the same day 😊.

I think that both of these approaches represent a failure of imagination.

Our text from Ephesians offers a different approach.

The bringing together of diverse people that Paul speaks of is not “cheap grace” (to borrow the term Dietrich Bonhoeffer made famous); it is not the blanket acceptance that our “tolerant” culture of diversity would prefer.

Paul is clear Jesus is the new reference point for Gentile Christians. In Jesus Christ, God shows us what it means to be human, what a genuinely good life looks like, what we were created for.

We were created not for whatever floats our boat or whatever makes us feel good or whatever hand biology and culture happen to have dealt us as so much of our culture would have us believe, but for **good works**, for righteousness, for becoming the kinds of people who exhibit the fruit of God's spirit (Eph. 2:10).

BUT, Paul is also not saying, “earn it” or “prove that you deserve it!” or “make it happen!”

Paul makes it very clear—in Ephesians and throughout his letters—**that before we ever gave God a second thought, we were objects of God's love and mercy.**

This is the truest thing we will ever hear about ourselves

We are chosen, given a gift (Eph. 2:9). The good news is that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves... and that God has invited us to participate in the newness that God is bringing about.

The human temptation is always toward either/or thinking. Grace *or* works. But the gospel is both/and.

Grace *and* works.

Acceptance and love *and* the challenge to live as we were made to live.

Individual forgiveness and acceptance *and* one new humanity full of all kinds of different people, together making known the eternal wisdom of God.

So, here at the outset of 2014, I think Paul would want to tell us that newness is possible, that newness is essential to the story that we are a part of, that newness is what we should expect given how the God that we worship works in the world.

As we head out into 2014, we need both sides of the story we are a part of ringing in our ears.

We need to remember that we were created by God for good works. We were made to bear fruit, to be people of reconciliation; we were made for a unity that demonstrates the Christ has broken down the walls that we often put up to divide ourselves.

But we also need to hear the word “grace.”

God’s love for you and me does not depend upon how well we perform in 2014. It does not depend on the victories we attain or the things we accomplish or the people we serve, or the unity amidst diversity that we are able to demonstrate...

It does not depend on *anything* we can do.

As you head out into 2014, know this.

God loves you. God has given you the gift of salvation.

And the God who is always doing a new thing (Isa. 43:19) has invited you into a life of newness, a life of wide embraces and diversity, a life where we are all together moving from death to life and becoming more and more like Jesus.

Amen.