

New Year, New Creation

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Well, it's the first Sunday of 2024. Happy New Year!

Firsts are always interesting Sundays to preach on, whether it's the first Sunday of Advent, or Lent, or the first Sunday of summer, or the first Sunday after summer or the first Sunday of a new calendar year.

Firsts can mark something of a turning of the page or setting the tone for what will come.

Over the past six years, the first Sunday of a New Year has usually been the first Sunday of our Faith Questions sermon series — the series where your questions set the preaching agenda between Epiphany and Lent (and sometimes beyond, depending on the number of questions submitted).

That was the plan again this year. You will notice I said "was" and not "is." This is because to my surprise, I received precisely zero questions this time around.

Now, the easy joke here is that I guess, after six years of doing this series, I've finally answered all your questions about God and faith and the bible and cultural issues with such comprehensive clarity and penetrating insight that there is nothing left to say.

You're welcome. 😊

Well, obviously not.

I don't actually know why there were no questions this year. Maybe I didn't publicize the series well enough in advance this year. Maybe people were just busy or couldn't figure out how they wanted to word a question they may have had.

And then there's just plain old human forgetfulness (something I am becoming increasingly well acquainted with!).

So, I've been trying not to overinterpret your silence. Perhaps the series has run its course, perhaps not. We'll have to see.

Anyway, with no questions to plan a series around, I had to come up with a plan B for a preaching schedule between now and the beginning of Lent on Feb 18.

Here's what I came up with. On the Sundays where I'm preaching, I'm going to be doing a kind of 3 part "Why Christianity?" series. One of the biggest faith questions of them all!

I'm going to be focusing on how Christianity addresses three basic human longings or virtues, to borrow from Plato: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

I'll be devoting the sermons on Jan 14, February 4, and Feb 11 to each of these categories and how the Christian story addresses them.

I'll be away on Jan 21 and 28. On those Sundays Tim Wiebe-Neufeld (MCA Executive Minister) and Zachary Wirzba respectively will be preaching (Zach is going to be talking about humour, which should be good!).

That's the lay of the land between now and Lent.

Today, I thought I would do a kind of hybrid sermon.

I want to sort of introduce the "Why Christianity?" series, or at least reflect on why I chose the theme. I also want to talk about some New Year's themes; I'll do that at the end.

So, why "Why Christianity?"

I'm going to ask for your patience in advance as I try to explain how this idea came to be in my brain, as it won't be obvious right away.

The idea came to me while I was playing tennis on December 28... outside... in Alberta. Which is barely believable looking outside this morning and looking ahead to what's coming this week weather-wise!

(If you're playing tennis outside in late December in Alberta, it really ought to be good for a sermon illustration, right?)

When I play racquet sports (tennis, squash, pickle ball, even ping pong), I tend to play fairly defensively. I keep the ball in play. I run down shots, I get it back in the court, I keep the rally alive, hopefully long enough for the person on the other side of the net to make a mistake.

I'm not bad at this. But I'm not as good at attacking, at positively trying to end the rally or win the point. I tend to make the safe shot more than the aggressive shot.

This tendency actually extended to all sports. In soccer and hockey, I always played defense. My focus was more on keeping the ball or the puck out of my net than on putting into the other team's net. In baseball, I was better out in the field than at batting (except the time I tried to catch a fly ball with my teeth, but that's another story 😊).

As I was playing tennis on December 28, it occurred to me, that there's only so far you can get playing defensively. You can have a good game, you can get a good workout, you can have a lot of fun.

But if your default is always to defend instead of being more positive and trying to actively win the point, there's a limit to how far you can go.

Ok, let's see if we can stretch a metaphor here. I think that it's possible to take that same defensive approach from the world of sports into faith.

For a big part of my life, I thought it was my task to defend the Christian faith. To defend it against criticisms, to protect it against outside attacks, to prove that it was intellectually respectable, rational, believable.

To prove that you could be smart and religious. To prove that *it could be done*.

To take this thing called "Christian faith" that I had received and accepted and believed, to take the institutions of the church, the traditions, the practices, the ways of being and doing, and just preserve it.

There is value in this, just like there's value in keeping the ball in play in a tennis match. It's important to remove unnecessary obstacles to belief, to seek to answer challenges or to fend off criticisms. It's important not to just cast aside traditions and practices and institutions that have served people well for generations.

I have written a great many words over the years in the defense of Christianity and the church, and I don't in any way think these words were wasted.

But I think it's important to move beyond just saying, "Look, I can defend this, this is believable, I can make a rational case for this" to "this is what actively draws me to Jesus."

Perhaps it's a subtle difference, but I think it's an important one.

This is why the "Why Christianity?" idea for a mini-series appealed to me. It's not like going on "attack" for Christianity (this is where the metaphor breaks down), but it is about saying, "Why is Christianity not only believable, but attractive and compelling?"

It's good if we can say of Christian faith, "Yes, I can defend this. There are enough good reasons for me to give my life to this.

It is even better if we can say, "I see in Jesus Christ and his gospel a life, and a faith, and a hope that is not just defensible, but good, and true, and beautiful."

So that's what I hope to do next Sunday and then the first two Sundays in February.

For the remainder of my sermon, I want to transition to a kind of new year's theme. I suspect that you, like me, may have been bombarded with media this week on the theme of "new year, new you."

I'm not even on social media, but I've seen an endless parade of articles written by people urging their readers to all kinds of newness in the year ahead.

There were exercise goals. More steps, more calories, more, more, more. Get fit, lose the weight. This is probably the most common New Year's resolution (and many gym memberships are probably already being underused by January 7).

I came across reading goals. People posting how many books they're going to read in 2024. I saw one guy who (very humbly) lamented that he only read 120 in 2023 instead of his usual 150 and resolved to do better in 2024.

(I did the math. That's like 2 or 3 a week, which seems unreasonable, but I digress.)

There are also relationship goals to set, and professional goals.

Or what about spiritual goals? Maybe this will be the year you finally read the bible all the way through. Or get up early for morning prayer. Or follow through on that plan to donate your time or money to that cause that you've always been meaning to.

It's easy to poke fun at all this. I've done it many times (I arguably just did it again). But I appreciate the desire to want a new start.

I don't know if I want to "reinvent" myself (as many articles promised), but I would certainly like to be a better person in 2024 than I was in 2023, in all the categories above and probably a few others besides.

I don't want to just slide into a kind of defeatist attitude that just cynically says, "Why bother with any of that resolution stuff?" Change is exciting, change is important, and change is possible. I believe this to be true.

To a point.

(You knew I was going to say that didn't you?)

Because even while I believe in everything I just said about newness and change, I also believe that human nature remains... human nature.

As the great Chinese philosopher Confucius said (or might have said, depending on which corner of the internet you listen to), "Wherever I go, there I am."

In our text this morning, Paul talks about the new creation that is being birthed, the new creation that is the reality for all who are in Christ.

In verse 17, Paul says:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

This is an incredible statement. It sounds too good to be true. Indeed, it seems not only too good to be true, but actually false.

Everything old has passed away? *Everything* has become new? So why doesn't it feel this way? Why do those of us who are "in Christ" feel and look and act not so different from anyone else.

Why isn't the Christian life a steady, victorious march "up and to the right." Why does human nature seem so stubbornly resistant to change?

We make some progress. We fall back. We have victories and we have defeats. We make some changes in our lives, but then we revert to old habits, old failures.

We don't *feel* like new creations. Look at any church in the world, and you will see plenty of old creations doing all the old things they've done for many years.

Heck, look at the church Paul is *writing to* in Corinth, the very Christians Paul is describing as "new creations." It's full of people Paul has been very critical of in other parts of his letters, whether it's for sexual immorality, or bad theology, or abusing the Lord's Supper, or a whole catalogue of other things.

So, what is Paul saying here? I think the key is those two words "in Christ." If anyone is *in Christ*, there is a new creation.

For those who are in Christ, it is his merits, not our own, that are now our true identity.

"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19).

In one of the deepest, most mysterious and beautiful verses in all of Scripture, Paul says:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Any one of us who follow Jesus may not look particularly new at any given moment in our lives.

But when God looks at us, he looks through the lens of the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf and he sees... New creations.

Dearly loved, fallen, stumbling bumbling glorious image bearers of God who, by some mysterious theological alchemy, have been raised to God's glorious throne by Christ's "all sufficient merit," as we sing in the great Advent hymn Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus.

He does not see our sins, our mistakes, our failures, the innumerable things that drag us down. He sees Jesus Christ, the one who knew no sin and yet became sin for us.

"So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20).

What is an ambassador? An ambassador is an official representative of one state to another. Ambassadors represent the interests of their sending nation in a foreign place.

As followers of Jesus, we are representatives of the new creation in the midst of the old creation. We are heralds of peace and shalom in a world where these things are often seen as rumours or impossible ideals.

God is making his appeal through us. Ambassadors are to represent their home country well. Ambassadors say, this is how things work in my country — the country of new creation, the country of reconciliation, justice, and peace.

As ambassadors of this new creation, Paul reminds us, we don't regard things from a merely human point view any longer.

We see with new eyes now. We see and we hear with new creation eyes and ears. We have our radar tuned to a different frequency.

Even though we live in a country where signs of sin and brokenness still abound, we are watching and listening for new creation because we are convinced that those two little words — "in Christ" change everything.

But as important as ambassadors are, I don't want to end with our role. I want to end with God's.

On this first Sunday of 2024, this is what I am most thankful for, it is the only reason I have any hope for myself, for the church, for the world in the year or years ahead.

All this is from God in Christ, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.

God is the great reconciler. God is the only one who can weave all the wrong and the pain and the sorrow that our world has wrought into something good, true, and beautiful.

We are seven days into 2024. That's enough time to have made a bit of progress on the new you. It's also enough time for the old you to have made an appearance or two. Or three. Or four. 😊

I hope and pray that as we continue to move into this new year, that we will do so animated and enlivened by the newness that comes not from our limited abilities to effect change in our lives or in our world, but by the newness that God has made possible.

In Christ.

Amen.

