

REIGNING IN THE NEW YEAR

Sermon, January 1, 2012

Texts: Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3; Luke 2: 22-40

Do you want to know what 2012 will bring? Well, I can tell you. 2012 will bring change. It certainly will bring change to Benjamin Desmond, who just introduced me to his fiancée Jenny moments before worship began; they were engaged last night. It will also bring change to Chris Nazareth and Jamie Dolan, who became engaged Friday evening. Yes, the New Year will bring change; I can guarantee that. In the Clark household in 2012, my "baby" (and our lector this morning) will be taking her Driver's Education training. My son will be going to college. My oldest daughter will be enjoying her last year as a single woman, as she will be married to her fiancé in 2013. And there will be changes in our church. It's a sobering reality to know there are people who were here last New Year's who are not with us today; at the same time, it's encouraging to know there are people here this morning who weren't a part of our congregation last New Year's. Yes, the new year will bring change.

Now, why is that always true? It is paradoxically one of the most obvious lessons all of us learn and experience, and at the same time it is one of the hardest ... and that is if there is one thing that is constant in this world, it is that things *change*. Life keeps moving around on us. I'm about to use an illustration I used in the funeral services of three artists of our congregation: Bob Plouffe, who passed away June 2005; Karl Rittman, who departed in August of 2001; and Jack Stewart, who went to be with our Lord in March of 2004. All three were men of wonderful talent and each won critical acclaim in their lifetimes. Bob's sketching of the steeple still graces our bulletin covers; Karl's paintings can be found in City Hall, Kent Hospital and other places in Warwick; Jack's sketch of the church building still graces the church stationery we still use and occasionally sell at the bi-annual bazaar.

I'm sure all of you have had those moments when you felt you were at a place where you got your life just right. You had close friends who were always available, your family members were all healthy, work was going pretty well, and you got yourself a good church where they sang HYMNS (instead of the 7/11 choruses ... seven words, eleven times) and they were hymns you knew ... usually. Didn't you want to nail it all down, saying, "This is it! This is just right. Nobody move!" Well, that is what the artist does. He nails down that perfect moment before it all changes and moves on. Through the medium of art he/she takes a picture. He/she captures the special moment, "freezing" it for eternity on canvas or paper. Norman Rockwell's work probably comes to mind for many; like no other, he captured American nostalgia taking place in the ordinary moments.

But we know the picture is not alive. We know life moves on. Life keeps changing on us.

Why can't things stay the same? Why do we have to keep letting go of cherished people and things and adjusting to new people, new things? At times I'm tempted to pray, "Dear God, don't you know I'm an old dog; why do I have to keep learning new tricks?" Friendships, workplaces, the congregation, family dynamics, economic circumstances, political figures ... they all just keep changing. Why can't everything stay right where it is? Why do we have to keep growing and maturing? Why do we have to say goodbye to people we love? Why do we have to keep losing things along the way, like our family, our health, our dreams? Why can't we all just stay put right where we are?

Why? Because we are on our way to a place where things no longer change. We are on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem. This "new" Jerusalem toward which all of creation is heading is a place where all of God's people, us included, will finally and fully understand what the Artist, the creator God, has been up to, how it all fits together. I think heaven will be like a permanent, fully completed work of art, but it will be a living picture ... a living picture of a perfect moment that lasts for eternity, where things no longer change. A place where there is no more disease, no more death, no more disruption of the good. And God Himself will be there, as the Bible tells us in Revelation, to "... wipe away all tears from our eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." But we aren't there yet.

During Advent we read many of the Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah to be born in Bethlehem who will come to bring peace. It was a wonderful vision! The throne of David will be restored, the Prince of Peace will come, and His kingdom will endure forever. The biblical notion of peace is quite different from our contemporary understanding. We think of peace simply as the absence of conflict. We often do anything we can to avoid conflict, thinking that's creating peace. The biblical notion of peace, though, is much more proactive; it is called "shalom." Shalom is a noun, but it implies action ... it carries the connotation of *making* things right, of setting things straight, of fixing things and working to make and keep things whole and complete. So the prophecies were of One who would come and establish "shalom," He would come to fix things, bringing wholeness, completion, right-ness! And His reign would never, ever, ever end. And all creation is headed to that destination of wholeness, completeness.

Another of the frustrating and disappointing realities of life is not only do things keep changing, but there are so many things that aren't complete, and even when they are complete, they don't stay that way. Stuff just keeps

breaking. Appliances break, cars break, furniture breaks, office machines, copiers, and computers all break. Christmas toys break ... and quite often while Dad is trying to put them together. Our bones break and, as the years progress, our bodies break and fall apart. Our hearts break, physically and emotionally. Human relationships break. People will break their promises to you. We speak of, say, a car breaking *down*, while human relationships break *up* ... as if to imply, correctly, that the latter is much more explosive.

When my brothers and I were small ... I think I was six years old ... my grandmother had some long-necked ceramic glass poodles in her parlor. We just knew if we even *touched* those poodles, she would cut off our fingers. Well, one day the three of us were left alone in that parlor for a short while. And as I remember it, my brothers got a bit rambunctious. Of course, I was sitting in the corner reading my Bible, but my brothers started acting up. My oldest brother Alan threw a pillow at my other brother Glenn; Glenn ducked, and ... you guessed it ... one of Grandmom's poodles took it on the chin. The poodle crashed to the floor, amazingly intact ... except for a neatly severed head. I remember thinking, *"That's it. We're gone."* Well, my grandmother chided us, but gently ... she didn't cut off our fingers ... she loved us. And as I grew I learned Grandmom had an attitude about "things" that I try to emulate to this day: She knew that all things break eventually. All things. *And she determined she would be thankful for the time she had with things while they were unbroken, rather than remain bitter and angry and resentful when they would inevitably break.* When you expect something to break, you are less traumatized when it does. By the way, my grandmother glued that poodle's head back on ... and kept that poodle in her parlor for years and years afterward, although the crack was plainly visible. It's more than fifty years later and I'm still terrified of fragile ceramic sculptures. She passed away more than thirty years ago, yet to this day, almost every time I think of her, I think of that long-necked ceramic poodle with a cracked neck ... as well as her gracious attitude about *things*.

There is nothing in this life that is invulnerable to brokenness. Nothing. Nothing appeared more real than those two enormous trade towers in Lower Manhattan ten and half years ago. If before 9-11 you had ever stood at the base of those towers and looked up, you had to be overwhelmed at their monumental strength. After 9-11, they were dust and debris. Sigmund Freud claimed religion was an illusion, a projection of wishful thinking. Healthy-minded people, he thought, embraced reality without such a crutch. No, Dr. Freud. The kingdom of God is the only "thing" that is ultimately real. HIS kingdom is forever. True religion is not a crutch; it is a *foundation*. It is a way ... really, the *only* way ... of constructing our world. Any world that is going to survive the brokenness and the volatility and change of this life is going to have to be built upon something more real and substantial than steel and concrete. Only the unshakable foundation of the kingdom of God will do. We need to build our lives on this foundation, this enduring hope. Sooner or later, all other illusions of strength and power will break apart and fall.

The Prince of Peace arrived on Christmas, not only as the Son of God incarnate, but also as the One who could give us this something that cannot break apart ... the kingdom of God. When Gabriel announced the conception of Jesus to Mary, he concluded by saying, *"...and his kingdom will never end."* I wonder what Mary thought of those words when she gave birth to her son and placed him in a manger, which is a feeding trough for animals. Did she say, *"So, this is the one from heaven who will begin a new, enduring kingdom that will not end?"* Maybe she was disappointed ... or maybe she really did *get* it. I'm sure she was greatly encouraged when the shepherds came telling the story of heavenly hosts of angels, angels who proclaimed, *"Peace on earth,"* because this Savior, this Son of David, has been born in the City of David, Bethlehem. Then, too, the Magi came visiting. These wise men got a little lost along the way, and they had stopped to ask directions of the one who was the official "peace keeper" in the area, the reigning king of the Jews, King Herod. Herod the Great. The one with the strength and power to maintain the peace with Rome. Yet, as Mary knew, the Magi were wise enough to continue their search for the real Prince of Peace. They continued the search until they came to THIS house. The star led them to this house, to this baby. and the wise men bowed down and worshipped him, and gave him royal gifts. Perhaps Mary thought, *"This really is the One who will establish the divine throne forever and ever. This is the Prince of Peace, the king of kings, whose kingdom will never end."*

But then ... things quickly got very dark. Mary and Joseph had to flee for their lives. You don't often see this part of the Christmas story portrayed in pageants, but the birth of the Prince of Peace was immediately followed by a bloody atrocity, a state-sponsored terrorism, as all the male children under two years of age in Bethlehem were mercilessly slaughtered. That first Christmas, I'm sure there was more hurt and grief than joy and love. More brokenness than wholeness. More apparent cause for despair than for hope. But I think Mary knew, Joseph knew, the shepherds knew, the Magi knew ... that this was nothing more than a dark chapter in a story that was not yet done being written. The great story of God's kingdom begun in Jesus Christ will endure.

This holiday season, especially in the economic climate today, I'm sure there are homes here that know more hurt and grief than joy and love, more brokenness than wholeness, more apparent cause for despair than for hope. But I'm also sure these, too, are nothing more than dark chapters in a story that is not yet done being written. The great story of God's kingdom begun in Jesus will endure. Choose to believe that. Choose hope. There is a new King born into our world, a new king in our lives, a King that wants to restore wholeness, a wholeness that will endure, a King who wants to reign in your lives this new year and forever. Worship him, serve Him, believe in Him, no matter how dark it may be right now ... for the reign of Jesus Christ is far, far from being over.