

“NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS”

REVELATION 21:1-6a

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INTRODUCTION

Some of us make resolutions like the guy I heard about recently. He told his friend: "There's nothing like getting up at six in the morning, going for a run around the park, and taking a brisk shower before breakfast." The second man asked, "How long have you been doing this?" The first guy said: "I start tomorrow."

Why do we bother to make New Year's resolutions in the first place? Maybe it is because resolutions help us to identify our priorities. They answer the question: “How do I want to invest my time, energy, money, and talents in this New Year?”

And so we come to our reading from the book of Revelation, chapter 21.

REVELATION DESCRIBES A NEW BEGINNING

New Year’s resolutions express our hope for something new and better, as we wonder, “Who can I be,” and, “What can I do?” Four times the word, “new,” is used in today's scripture to describe God's commonwealth: “a new heaven,” “a new earth,” “new Jerusalem,” “Behold, I make all things new.” Some of you are familiar with that preacher of possibility thinking, Robert Schuller. Schuller is famous for having cut the word ‘impossible’ out of his dictionary.

This morning we want to encourage some possibility thinking. We want to explore the possibility that this coming new year will be the best year any of us has ever had. I realize that for some of you that will sound flippant and trite. You are facing mountains - mountains you are not certain you can climb. Notice, though, I am not saying that this will be the easiest year you have ever faced. Only that it can be the best year. Success cannot always be measured in either accomplishment or accumulation. If the coming year brings you closer to God and closer to your friends, if it helps you value more highly the things that really matter, and causes you to appreciate more deeply the gift of simply being alive, it will be a great year regardless of your other circumstances. So, let's explore that possibility together. Certainly our text from Revelation is a possibility text.

Revelation 21 records the ultimate new beginning. John's vision describes a New Jerusalem: No more suffering! All that robs life of flourish, hope, and fulfillment, is absent in God's commonwealth. All brokenness is gone. There is only love and joy.

The New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth in the past, present, and future. Because God's holy city is always in a steady process of descending, never fully descended. Maybe heaven, God's commonwealth, is not remote. Not merely what we wait for, but what we have begun to experience now. Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes." If only we had eyes to see and ears to hear! That God has reached out to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And through the power of God's

Spirit, God dwells with us today. Do you understand how much God loves us? That's how completely we can trust him.

So who can we "be" in God's commonwealth? We can be people who trust in God's love.

WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS

God's love. Two things are involved in that love. In his letter to the *Romans*, Paul first tells us that though all fall short of perfection, God's love and forgiveness are truly unconditional, and cannot be earned. And secondly, that God's love and forgiveness are unfathomably all-inclusive, including both Gentile and Jew, that is, all of humanity!

A true story about a four-year-old boy who loves the movie Toy Story-- particularly Buzz Lightyear. In Sunday school they were learning that God's love has no limits. At the end of class the teacher reviewed the lesson and asked, "So, how much does God love us?" Quoting Buzz's big line in the film, the little boy replied, "To infinity and beyond!" And he's right! That's how much God loves us. We can see the depth and width of God's love on the cross of Calvary.

We are God's children. We may not be a Rockefeller or a Kennedy or Roosevelt. No, our parentage is more exalted than that. You and I have God for our parent! We have a certain dignity because of our heritage. You and I know who we are. You and I are God's children, who God loves more than we can ever know.

Yes, we can make a strong case for focusing on "being." But in God's commonwealth, in the New Jerusalem, we are also called to "do."

WE ARE HUMANS DOING

Is God's commonwealth an eternal "Rest in Peace?" Or is it more like Santa's workshop? As small and limited as we are compared to God, what can we do in God's commonwealth?

Well, we can reach outside ourselves and participate in the ushering-in of God's New Jerusalem. We can do this because, as the NRSV translates today's scripture, "God will dwell with God's people." The KJV translates the same scripture: "God will tabernacle with them." Or, as the *Message Bible* translates it, "God has moved into the neighborhood." God is in the hood! We are the living "tabernacles," tents, in which God's Spirit dwells. And God's Spirit is powerful and active. In *Matthew 25*, which John read today, Jesus inspires us to action in God's new creation. Jesus tells those with eyes to see and ears to hear that we see and hear God in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison.

The writer of *James* is explicit: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply them their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" Teresa of Avila, from 500 years ago, reminds us Jesus died and went to heaven, and his body is at the right hand of God. He no longer has a body here on earth, no-body except for us. We are now Jesus' eyes and ears with which he perceives the world's suffering. We are now his hands and feet with which he relieves that suffering. No, God's commonwealth is not an eternal "Rest in Peace." It is more like Santa's workshop.

If tears are wiped from eyes, it will be because the church of Jesus of Nazareth got busy. We are his ambassadors. We are those entrusted with carrying on the ministry he began 2,000 years ago. Where there are children who need tears wiped from their

eyes, that is where Jesus means for us to be.

And I have some good news for you. Compassion enriches your life.

Want proof? AMERICAN HEALTH magazine reported the findings of a study by the University of Michigan's Research Center. This study says that more than any other activity doing regular volunteer work dramatically increases life expectancy. It's more important than jogging or aerobics or even oat bran. Help somebody else and you will live longer. You will have more vitality, more energy, more zest for life.

We were not created to be served but to serve. The happiest people in this world are people who serve others. There's nothing you can do for yourself that will yield greater rewards.

Yes, we can make a strong case for focusing on "doing." Now we understand the dichotomy. Be or Do. Be or Do. Be or Do.

WE ARE BOTH BEINGS AND DOING

So, which is it? In God's commonwealth, should we focus exclusively on being, or should we focus exclusively on doing? Should we think of ourselves as human beings or as humans doing?

In Revelation, God's commonwealth is the New Jerusalem, a city. In cities, people live not in isolation, but in community. An active community, where being and doing are related, and people are engaged. But we are overwhelmed. How can we focus on both being and doing?

We forget we are gifted by God with the capacity to multitask, both sequentially and simultaneously. We are like that bull elephant at the circus, chained with a small chain to a small stake in the ground. Like that bull elephant we are restrained not by the

chain, but by our mental restraints. Jesus of Nazareth frees us from our limited imagination. Frees us from our apathy. Frees us from our sin, that is, our brokenness. The brokenness that limits our imagination. Frees us into a life in God's commonwealth in the future, yes. But also frees us into a life in God's commonwealth in the now. Frees us from our chains so we can be all that we can be. Both human beings and humans doing.

CONCLUSION

When making your New Year's resolutions for 2008, I suggest only two. Who can you BE? Jesus of Nazareth calls you to trust that God loves you to infinity and beyond. What can you DO? With the full realization that God's love is unconditional, you participate in God's work shop. One of my pastor friends said Frank Sinatra had it right: "Do-be-do-be-do!" Not "either / or," but "both / and!" Human beings and humans doing.

I pray for you that 2008 will be a year for *both* "being" *and* "doing!"

All glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...