

It's a Wonderful Life

II Corinthians 5:14-21

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January 7, 2018

On this first Sunday of the New Year, the year 2018, the Apostle Paul has an important message for us. It is a message of hope. It is a message of peace. It is a message of joy. And it is a message of love. Having lit candles during Advent for hope, peace, joy, and love, all culminating in the lighting of the Christ Candle, we might well expect his message of hope, peace, joy, and love to have as its source Jesus Christ. And we would not be disappointed.

In our verses from II Corinthians 5 this morning, Paul is focused on Jesus Christ, and in particular his death and resurrection. The death of Jesus was not an accident, and it was not a disappointment, even though it felt disappointing to the first disciples and it feels that way to us when we read the Gospel accounts. Nevertheless, his death was not accidental and it was not disappointing, for his death achieved a great victory not only for humans, but for God himself. In verse 14 Paul tells us that the death of Jesus was done out of love. Light that candle of love.

The death of Jesus brought new creation. All the old things in life are gone when we experience new creation in Jesus Christ. Talk about hope, to have new creation, a new beginning, to have the old swept away and to live a life filled with newness. Light that candle of hope.

The death of Jesus was a reconciling death. Once we were separated from God by our sins, but Christ overcame the sin of our lives and the sin of the world. We have been reconciled to God. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled. Light the candle of peace.

To be loved by God, a love that is demonstrated in such a powerful way by Jesus Christ offering his life for us, that is the greatest of loves, the type of great love Jesus said that is found when a person lays down his life for his friend. To have a new beginning, and to be reconciled to God, these are priceless gifts. So it is that Jesus tells three parables about ones who are lost being found, about new beginnings, about reconciliation, all found in Luke chapter 15. Can you guess the common theme in the parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost child? There is rejoicing. Every time one...one...one of God's lost children is found, or comes home, or experiences reconciliation, the angels in heaven rejoice. Light the candle of joy.

I purposely selected this passage from II Corinthians for us to read after Christmas, for this passage states in such a powerful and compelling way that what God did when he sent his Son Jesus into this world did not end with his birth, did not end with his death, and does not end even with his resurrection. Instead of things ending with Jesus, they begin. There is new life, or as the Apostle says in our passage, there is new creation.

I made a reference just a few moments ago to one of our beloved Christmas Carols. The Carol I referred to is Hark the Herald Angels Sing. On a morning when we are talking about the new creation in Christ that is made real by the reconciliation we experience through Jesus Christ, Hark the Herald Angels Sing fits so very well. It has the words, “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled. Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies...” The hope, peace, joy, and love that come through the carol are a wonderful witness to the new creation that is found in Jesus Christ.

That beautiful hymn seemed to be under every stone I turned over this Christmas. I had five preset buttons on my radio, all tuned to stations playing Christmas Music. All five stations had a different demographic, aimed at a different market, different musical tastes, etc...but guess what they all had in common. At one time or another they all played Hark the Herald Angels Sing. We went Christmas Caroling as a church. With a former choir member who now lives at the Apple Clipper, with a family who that very day had lost a beloved family member, and with one of our founding members at the Royal Nursing Home, we sang the Carol. For Betsy Jewell, Virginia Stauble, Dee and Kirsten and Nicole Chapman, for Florence Madison and Joyce Dionne...the confidence that in Christ there is new creation filled the rooms where gathered and the hearts of each one of us. In New York City, at the Christmas Spectacular with the Rockettes, on a stage in front of thousands of people, in a show put on multiple times each day for well over a month, at the climactic moment of the show the songs of the carol filled the air...how many thousands heard it in Radio City Music Hall, on the airwaves of multiple radio stations, in homes and nursing homes and churches, and churches, and street corners, and shopping malls...peace on earth, and mercy mild...why? Because God and sinners are reconciled. In Christ Jesus, there is new creation.

My older brother makes fun of me by always asking me when we have moved to a new church, “Have you told them about “It’s a Wonderful Life”?” He knows my favorite movie is that classic Jimmy Steward Christmas tale about a man named George Bailey. He is convinced that every sermon I preach is about “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Well, in a way he is right, because every sermon is about the wonderful life we have been given through Jesus

Christ. What is more wonderful than new creation? But I can't wait to tell my older brother Danny I almost made it three years at Dunn's Corners without preaching about George Bailey and "It's a Wonderful Life."

In the movie George gets discouraged. He loses hope. He gives in to despair. The darkness overwhelms him. And he wishes he had never been born. His Guardian Angel Clarence appears and proceeds to show him what the world would be like if George had never been born. I have seen it so many times I know exactly when to laugh, when to smile, when to cry, and when to get the shivers of joy. The shivers of joy come when George realizes his life is a gift and he cries out, "I want to live, I want to live, I want to live..." When he finds he is alive he races home. As the hugs and laughter and tears flow, as he is reunited with his wife, his kids, his friends, and even his enemies, it is a beautiful scene of reconciliation. And then you hear the music...and then a song starts...and then they sing a carol...a Christmas Carol...in a movie that has been playing since in theaters and homes and in special screenings since it was released in 1946...how many millions of people, have watched a man find a new lease on life, and while the final scene played out, with a smile on the face of Jimmy Stewart that fills the big screen, heard the words of the Christ Centered Christmas Carol, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." It is a wonderful life we have been given, and it has been given to us by Jesus Christ, who died so that we might live, not stuck in old ways burdened by past failures and hardened by disappointments and crushed by heartbreaks. He died so that we might live with hope, with peace, with joy, with love.

In Christ Jesus there is new creation. The old is gone. Behold, the new is come. That is what a man who once went by the name Saul is telling us. And he is living proof. Once he was Saul the Pharisee. Now he is Paul, the Apostle of Christ Jesus. He himself is a new creation.

An interesting thing happened one day while I was sitting in my office at our church in Houston. I heard a knock at the door. When I opened the door there was a handsome young man standing before me. He asked for the pastor. I said, "That's me." He took a second look, and decided I was telling the truth. He came in and gave me a sales pitch. He said his name was Pablo and he took care of yards, and he could make the church yard look a lot better. Would I hire him? I said, "Pablo, I'm just the pastor. I can't make decisions like that." I explained a little about Presbyterians and committees, and our property committee, and by the end of that his eyes had glazed over. He mumbled thanks and walked out.

A few minutes later there was a knock on my door. I opened it. It was Pablo. He asked if he could talk to me for a few minutes. He came in, and this handsome young man proceeded to tell me the sad story of his life. He said he had made some bad decisions, and hurt the people he loved. He said he had burned every bridge, and just felt like he had no future. He asked me, "Pastor, is there any hope for me?" Well, God gave me a flash of insight. I didn't tell him any more about committees. I didn't tell him about the Presbyterian form of Government. I didn't tell him about the chain of command in a Presbyterian Church. No, at that point all I told him about was Jesus Christ. I told him about Jesus Christ, and I told Pablo that because of Jesus Christ, he could have a clean start.

Pablo shook his head. He said it sounded good, but he just couldn't believe God would give him a clean start. Pablo was so aware of his past failures, the way he had hurt people, the way he had let others down, the way he had destroyed relationships, he just couldn't quite believe God would give him a second chance. At that point I opened my bible to II Corinthians 5:17, and read these words, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." I sat my bible down and looked Pablo in the eye. I said, "Pablo, the man who wrote those words had made some really bad decisions. He put some people to death. He even called himself an enemy of God. Then God changed his life and gave him a clean start. He even changed his name. His name was Saul. Then his name became Paul." As I looked him in the eye I asked him, "Pablo, what is your name in English?" His eyes got wide. He said, "Paul. That is my name in English." I said, "Pablo, you can have a clean start. God can change not only a person's name, God can change their life."

As we worship here together on the first Sunday of a new year, I want to say to you I believe in new beginnings. I believe in new beginnings not because we turned a page on a calendar and a ball dropped in Times Square and we sang Auld Lang Syne and made some resolutions. I believe in new beginnings because there is a God who sent his one and only Son, and because of his life, and his death, and his resurrection, none of us, not a single one of us, is stuck in our past. In Christ Jesus, there is new creation. May we all embrace the love that is so freely given. May we all find the new life God has given through Jesus Christ. For surely he was born to raise the sons of earth, the daughters of earth, he was born to give us second birth. Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King.