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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/2/2010, Easter 5C
Revelation 21:1-6
Being Made New

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things *new*.” (Revelation 21:5, RSV)

To me, one of the most intriguing prayers of the church year comes from the Easter Vigil. Let me mention that if you have not yet attended the Vigil, I suggest that you have a liturgical treat in store. At the start of the liturgy on Holy Saturday evening, we gather on the sidewalk around the church steps. We prepare the new Christ candle; we bless the fire and light the candle. We process into the darkened church as the great Easter Proclamation is sung. Our church is bright now, with this beautiful spring sunshine radiating in through our colorful church windows. But there is also something moving and dramatic about an evening liturgy illuminated only by candlelight.

This prayer on my mind now is appointed to be read in the darkened church. We have only the candlelight from the pew torches. We sit back and listen as Bible reading after Bible reading is read aloud, often with Choir music between the readings, with each reading ending with a prayer. The prayer that interests me so much speaks of things being made *new*. It is a nighttime prayer brimming with excitement, for soon the great Easter cry will be heard: “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” The prayer I like goes thus:

O God, strength of the powerless and light in all darkness: look in mercy upon your Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery. Bring to completion your work of salvation; let the whole world experience and see that what was fallen is being raised up, that what was old *is being made new*, and that all things are being restored to wholeness through him from whom they first took being, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

That’s what Easter means: that things that have grown old and weary have hope of becoming young and strong again. The resurrection of Jesus means all the difference.

Though I’m an old-fashioned man, I still find the word “new” to be a sweet word. When I recall how some grey-haired saint of the church used to hobble along on an arthritic hip, and how that hobbling caused imbalance and therefore stress throughout the body, then I am grateful for that new hip. A new hip can be a great thing.

Likewise with any kind of renewal, any turning back of the clock. I think it's great, for example, when an out-of-shape middle-aged man at last begins to exercise and to eat and drink in more simple and disciplined ways, so that when old friends see that person, they cry out, "Why, you look like a *new* man!" New things are nice. New clothes, new shoes, a new car -- man, that would be sweet! A second chance in life is great for both our souls and our bodies.

If a new hip is nice, a new *heart* is even better. I do not mean an organ transplant, but a clean heart at peace once again. Alas, many a man, many a woman, could sigh and say, "I do so much regret that I did such and such. I wish it were not part of my biography, not part of what I know about myself. I wish my heart could be new."

So it was with King David when at last he came to understand the magnitude of his sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. Toward her, he was an adulterer and an abuser of sacred authority. Toward him, Uriah, he was a murderer. At last the spell of his sin and lethargy was broken by Nathan's charge, "Thou art the man!¹ Thou art the unjust man!" Then David grieved over what he had done and how he had been spoiling his soul. He yearned, then, for a clean heart. We hear of his longing in Psalm 51:

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Fill me with joy and gladness; let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice.

⁹Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (from Psalm 51, RSV)

What a longing heart we have here! David longs for a new heart.

The prophet Isaiah, then, assures every guilty conscience and sad heart that such a new heart is possible:

¹ 2 Samuel 12:7

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18, KJV)

And for that heart that has become old and weary and hard, perhaps even too hard to feel sorrow any longer over sin, the prophet Ezekiel also promises a new heart -- this time a living heart:

¹⁹And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19, RSV)

And, by way of a third one of Israel's great prophets, let me read aloud a familiar passage from Reformation Sunday, from Jeremiah Chapter 31. This read speaks of the divine method of making our hearts new: the method of filling the heart to overflowing with God's will and law:

³³But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law *within them*, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:33-34, RSV)

So it is that Israel has long prophesied that the damage done in the Garden of Eden, when humanity launched itself upon the path of disobedience to God, shall one day be undone.

Eden! Long ago I read a passing comment in Luther's commentary on Genesis that has left me wistful for Eden ever since. It was pious speculation on Luther's part -- the Bible does not actually go into such details -- but Luther liked to imagine that everyday sorts of things were simply better in Eden. I especially liked Luther's dream of how wonderfully blue the sky was in Eden and how clear and warm the sunshine.

Who could blame us for being a bit wistful for Eden? How far, how terribly far we have fallen behind from where we ought to be. We have grown old and decrepit compared to where we should have been by now. I mean, if humanity had not fallen into sin, I bet we would have solved cancer by now. I doubt that there would have been any cancer in the first place, but if in a fit of spitefulness Satan had hurled cancer into the Garden of Eden, why, we would have solved it in a flash! If only we had not let sin set us back so much!

We would have built lovely homes for everyone, like those country cottages we see in English detective movies, with green lawns and lovely flowers.

When it came time to die, we would simply head off to heaven as did Elijah. No more death. No more crying. No more sadness.

We would have been so much farther along in exploring God's creation. Even Star Trek would have had nothing on us.

Oh! I wish we could start again. I wish our hips were new, our hearts new, our virtue and piety restored, and that we were at peace once again, like innocent children with nothing but hope and adventure ahead of us.

That is why I so much like this morning's text:

⁵And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things *new*." (Revelation 21:5, RSV)

Do not be discouraged by the visions and mysteries of the book of *Revelation*. Try to keep the main point before you: *Revelation* speaks of something very good. *Revelation* speaks of the final and complete dwelling of God with humanity. It speaks of the fulfillment of Immanuel, "God with us." It speaks of the perfection of Christmas:

³and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God *is with men*. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And be pleased to ponder this: Our God has already begun to make all things new. Indeed, he has begun to make *you* new. This is the theme of Pentecost Sunday soon ahead of us. The Third Person of the Holy Trinity - the Spirit - has already been poured out on earth to move your hearts along, and to move my heart along, in the direction of holiness. Let us yield to that godly influence. Let us not deny that still small voice we sometimes hear in our hearts calling us on toward Christ-like life in this world.

It is nice to think of *Revelation's* end time and the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to this old earth. It is nice to think of history's culmination in the Kingdom of God and in citizens of that Kingdom with new and clean hearts, every one of them.

But it is nice too to go for such goodness even now. Seek sanctification now. Pursue improvement of your life even now. Seek to roll back the hands of time and to become more pure and innocent like you were at your best. Sin ages us! Forget the skin creams and the moisturizing lotions and all that. What we really need is to become new, like newborn children in the kingdom of God, new each day. Jesus Christ was, is, and ever shall be the youngest and strongest person

among us. He is the very Alpha and Omega of youthfulness and innocence. He bids us to come follow him. And in the following, we will be helping to make ourselves new and useful people on this earth, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.