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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/24/2016, The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Revelation 21:1-6

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from Revelation 21:

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

Before I launch into the sermon I prepared earlier this week, let me give you an immediate application of the good news of this text. This means that I must begin by sharing with you a sad note: our dear former member Oscar Schaedle has died. He died yesterday, at age eighty. He died from a stroke. So, when He who sits upon the throne says, “Behold, I make all things new,” take that promise to heart, and know that it includes Oscar Schaedle. Someday, we will see a new and strong and healthy Oscar again, standing at the head of our church steps somewhere in the New Jerusalem, greeting us in his beautiful way, and with his strong frame signaling to any mischief makers or thieves that they might as well move on, and not trouble our church! Except that in that good kingdom there will be no mischief makers or criminals, but rather repentant saints singing the praises of our holy God. Aye, and there will be no more tears or death or sighing any more, for our God is making all things new. That is my theme this morning. That is my happy theme: Our God is busy making all things new.

One of the most intriguing prayers of the church year takes place during the Easter Vigil. Let me plant a seed with you, my friends: If you have never attended the Easter Vigil, make up your minds that you mean to do so next springtime. It is a glorious liturgy.

At any rate, the appointed Easter Vigil prayer for the reading from Zephaniah 3 speaks of God making things new. In our darkened church, lit only by candles, someone reads that passage from Zephaniah and sits down. Then there is silence, and then I read aloud this prayer:

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

“... what was fallen is being raised up.” We saw that last Sunday, when St. Peter raised up again that good woman Dorcas. We will see it again someday for Oscar and for so many others of those we love who now rest on that far shore: Oscar has fallen, many have fallen, but “what was fallen is being raised up.”

Now, here is the great idea I want to lift up for us now: When St. John reports the mighty words of Him who sits upon the throne, “Behold, I make all things new,” we need not suppose that our God is waiting till the end of time to do this. He is not idly looking on at a sad and haphazard creation, letting it run itself amuck, only to suddenly intervene one day and make everything new. No! Our God does not delay in his new-making. In fact, it is our God’s continual joy and passion to make things new even now, all the time. Picture the New Jerusalem as being built one brick at a time, with you and me being those bricks. If before, in the conduct of our lives, we have been mere mud and straw, it is our Lord’s will for us that we should become solid, well-formed bricks for the building up of his kingdom.

We can find this in the Bible — this conviction that our God wants to make us new, beginning today. Strong testimony comes from various directions calling us to become new people – better people. Jesus had spoken of that, for example, in his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born *anew*, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, RSV)

Going on as before is not enough. We must be born again, born anew.

St. Paul likewise speaks of newness. For those who have come to Christ, a new life beckons:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is *a new creation*; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17, RSV)

And then, to take a third famous discussion of newness, we have Martin Luther’s explanation of the meaning of baptism for daily life:

What does such baptizing with water signify?

Answer: It signifies that the old Adam [the old Eve] in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that *the new man [the new woman]* should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence. (Tappert)

Newness calls to us: We must be born *anew*. If we are in Christ, we are a *new* creation. If we be baptized, our daily assignment is to put the old Adam, the old Eve to death and to rise up *new*, cleansed and righteous, living before God. There is no need to regret these words about newness, for many a life has been improved by becoming new. For many people in this world, giving their lives over to Jesus has meant that the weary old ways of sin and selfishness have given way to a new life in Christ. The cold heart has melted before the warmth of Christ's way of love. The old husband has become a new a better man. The old wife has become a new and better woman. Bad parents have turned toward their children in love and become better parents. Criminals have given up their unlawful ways. Those plunging toward disaster because of addiction have turned around, turned upwards to a new and spiritual life. Those lost in laziness and vice have repented and become new, so that acquaintances find themselves saying, "It is the same person, and yet somehow a changed person, a new person, a better person."

This morning we are speaking of newness. None of us need fear that we are forever trapped in old, slothful ways. None of us need fear that our heart is frozen and incapable anymore of being warm and happy again. None of us need fear that our being is set, as if in concrete -- unmovable, irreformable, destined to trudge on and on in old, weary, accustomed ways. None of us need fear that our Lord's new commandment of love is not meant for us -- that Jesus must have other people in mind when he said that we should love one another as he has loved us. No, Jesus is not speaking of *others*. He is speaking to you and to me. We *can* become new people on earth because he *calls* us to become new people on earth. His call is good enough! If Jesus says that we must be born anew, then let's dive into being born anew, for our loving Lord would not taunt us. He would not bid us to do something impossible for us. No! If Jesus says that we *must* be born again, then we *can* born again. A new way of life is waiting there for us to step into.

God has regenerated people as far gone as any of us. Especially I have King David on my mind. He did what kings do. He lusted for a woman, took her, issued a few commands manipulating the death of the woman's husband, married the woman and imagined that he could live happily ever after. But his was a passionate soul, and when at last he understood the depths of the sin he had done, then he grieved deeply. He longed for forgiveness, he longed for a clean heart, he longed to be able to start again, he longed to be new. We read of this 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.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and put a new and right spirit within me. (from Psalm 51, RSV)

Many a soul has cried out along similar lines. Many a soul has yearned to be young and innocent again, with a clean heart and new and right spirit. To such yearning souls, the One on the throne says,

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

One day, when the new Jerusalem comes, we will wake up in the morning, pick up once again our struggle to become new people, righteous before God, and we will find that *we do not* slip backwards again. The whole day will go by, and we will not find ourselves drifting back toward anger, back toward sloth, back toward selfishness. Rather, we will find the going good. We will find efforts to become new are working. The whole day will go by without decline – the whole year, even ten thousand years, and ages up on ages. All of those temptations and fears that used to pull us back into sin will be gone – booted out of reality by the One on the throne who makes all things new. There will be no more weeping, nor more dying, nor more sin, no more devil. Meanwhile, our job is to renew the battle day by day to become a new person in Christ.

The book of Revelation is mysterious and complex in many ways, but its fundamental message is pretty easy to follow: this world is heading toward God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace. The wolf will dwell in peace with the lamb, the lion shall eat straw like an ox, and the knowledge of the Lord will fill every human heart, so that there is no more room for sin and meanness. And so, our daily struggle to become new and better people is heading in the right direction – the direction of reality. Hang in there! The new Jerusalem is coming. The word of the Alpha and the Omega will shape reality and will bless your best efforts: “Behold, I make all things new.”

This morning’s text is an echo of a more ancient promise in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah had also spoken of a newness, but with a blessed addition. Let me read Isaiah’s old promise for you. He speaks in the name of the LORD

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall *not be remembered* or come into mind. (Isaiah 65:17).

Some of us have seen things we would just as soon forget. Some of have done things we would just as soon forget. Some of us have guilt that happened long ago, but haunts us still. The final benediction at the end of Private Confession speaks of forgetting our sin:

☐ Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven, whose evil deeds have been forgotten.

Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

When the new Jerusalem comes our burden of guilt, which we might never shake in this life, will at last “not be remembered or come into mind.” That is how thorough the new Jerusalem shall be. Even our sins shall at last no longer come to our minds.

No wonder St. Paul says that all of creation groans and longs for this:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; (Romans 8:19, NRSV)

And the One who sits upon the throne and makes all things new is most eager to begin that newness even now, to begin it with you, to begin it with me. Let us turn, then, to Christ again. Let him make of us what he will. It will be new and it will be good, for he is good, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.