

A NEW OUTFIT FOR 2007

Colossians 3:12-17
New Year's Eve, December 31, 2006
Rev. James Campbell

The holidays are filled with friends, food, gifts, goodwill and irony: one week we celebrate the hope of a baby and the next week we bid farewell to some of our fondest hopes as another year of life, and a whole host of unclaimed opportunities, passes away. It's no wonder people get depressed during the holidays with its stocking full of mixed messages.

Speaking of the ironic, here I am in church, the very place I swore I would never spend another New Year's Eve. You see, I spent every December 31st of my childhood, not watching Dick Clark bring in another Rockin' New Year, but down at the altar rail, praying out the old year and praying in the new. This was a pretty somber event; a purposeful time to remember that we had not accomplished all we had set out to do in the year prior. It also was a time to consider the unpredictability of life and to acknowledge that we had no idea what the New Year would bring us. So down to the altar we went, to ask for forgiveness and to pray that we might do it all better in the year to come. Well, I always found it pretty depressing, not just because I couldn't go to parties like other people, but because I was very well aware that what I had just promised to God, I probably wouldn't deliver.

Even after I stopped spending New Year's Eve in church, I couldn't shake that gloomy feeling implicit for me in this holiday. Whether I am in church or at a party

or sound asleep, the passing of an old year and the beginning of a new one seems to me to be a mixed blessing at best. And for the life of me, I just don't understand what all the celebration is about. Can't one year blend into another without all the hoo-hah? Do we really need to celebrate the fact that time is fleeting or that one more year of our lives is over? Is that why we put on silly hats and blow horns and drink champagne and kiss strangers and make grand promises to change our lives? Or is there something more to our desire to live out our future differently?

Some people would answer that with a resounding "Yes!" They see the New Year as a built-in opportunity to start fresh. These are the folks who take their New Year's Resolutions very seriously. And some of them even succeed in losing that last 10 pounds or saving more money or taking that trip of a lifetime. Well, God bless them... but despite my best intentions, my resolutions are usually discarded somewhere on the side of the road by mid February, feeling far too much like extra baggage on an already over-crowded trip I call my life.

And yet... and yet... every year I am drawn into the realm of the hopeful because the promise of a new beginning remains very attractive. And isn't that what we in the church promise to people? Don't we talk about the "new life in Christ" or the fact that God's faithfulness is new every morning? Maybe my gloom and depression around this annual celebration is the result of the recognition that there is a disconnect between this language of hope and how I really live my life, caught on the ever spinning wheel of the "already and the not yet."

This isn't simply my story or your story. This is the human story, as true for the church in Colossae as it is for us. The Colossians, modern day Turks, had heard the good news of Jesus Christ and in seeking to follow him they had experienced the freshness of a January 1st - a clean slate, a new beginning. But in the passing of time, in their day-to-day living, their humanity got in the way, and they reverted to the midwinter gloom of their former lives.

So Paul writes them a letter, and in it, he tells them plainly that they have gotten off course. Their lives were not as beautiful as they had once been; their hope not nearly as fresh. Instead Paul had heard that the church was full of anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, and lies. And that is a long, long way from the people they once were. But Saint Paul does not leave them there. Wanting them to have a fresh perspective, he used a metaphor they would have all understood. Colossae was known for producing particularly fine wool called colossinus, and with it people made beautiful clothes. Paul tells them: you desperately need a new outfit. The old one you're wearing is not becoming for the people called Christian. So, take off those ratty old clothes, and instead, wrap around yourself garments of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Try on the overcoat of forgiveness. And when you're not sure what to wear, put on love. It's the perfect accessory, binding everything together in harmony. Once you've changed your clothes, Paul writes, you'll be ready to go out and celebrate any day in style.

In my cynicism, I can read directives like Paul's and see them as just another set of resolutions: beautiful, but ultimately unattainable; inspirational but unrealistic. And

yet, those clothes look so beautiful hanging there, and I get so tired of the rags I wear. I get so tired of the rags we all wear: the filthy rags an immoral war in Iraq, and videotaped executions of tyrants, and the mass graves of innocents he left behind, and the murdered and forgotten people of Darfur, and the oppressive systemic abuse of minorities, and the rise of religious intolerance, and the denial of basic human rights in the name of God. It is all so ugly – and the garments of compassion and humility and meekness and patience and love so beautiful. But can I do it? Can I resolve to live a more beautifully tailored life in 2007? Is this the ultimate tease? Are we asked to do those things that we can never really do?

As is often the case in the lectionary readings, this passage, read so ably by David Seiple, is lifted out of its context, and in this case that is particularly unfortunate, because out of its context, it does read like a tired laundry list of the way we should live. But that is not what this is. Instead, this is the description of how we can live, because of the power and promise of the resurrection. The first verse of this third chapter reads: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...”

It may seem a little strange to jump from the manger to the empty tomb in the space of one week, but that is exactly where we find ourselves. And in the Christian Gospel, that is where we always, ultimately, find ourselves, because the resurrection of Jesus is the end all and be all of our faith. Without it, the story of a mysterious baby born to an unwed teenage mother would have long since passed into the pages

of history. It is the resurrection that changed everything. And it is the resurrection that can change us.

When looked at like a laundry list of good behaviors for the New Year, Paul's call to compassion and kindness and humility and meekness and patience and love has about the same staying power as the promise to lose weight once all the Christmas cookies are gone. But living in these clothes is not about resolving to do better, to be nicer. Living in these clothes is about looking up, where Christ is. It's about responding, as a way of life, to what already is. And what already is is a love for us so great that not even death could hold it down. This isn't a list of things we ought to do. This is what we can do, what we are capable of doing when we resolve to live out of love and not out of fear; when we resolve to look up, where Christ is.

Tonight as we all leave this place, some of us home, others to parties and family and friends, let's change our clothes. Let's put on something new. Why on earth would we choose to wear our tattered, dirty clothes of regret on this night of all nights, when we have been offered beautiful, shimmering garments, woven from God's undying love; garments to make us beautiful, for all the days yet to be.