

Making All Things New
Revelation 21:1-6
January 1, 2012
Rev. Scott D. Anderson

What's so special about January first?

For Christians, the New Year is marked on the first Sunday in Advent, when we begin our time of preparation for the coming of Christ child. In fact January first doesn't appear on the church calendar. When it falls on a Sunday, it is typically identified as the first Sunday after Christmas, as this morning's bulletin indicates. Roman Catholics set January 1 as the feast day of Mary, honoring the Mother of Jesus, but this is only one of many dozens of feast days throughout the year.

For the Chinese, New Years Day occurs in the early months of our calendar year, typically January or February and in 2012 falls on January 23rd. This is the first of 15 days of celebration and the start of the Year of the Dragon. Chinese New Year is a time to welcome longevity, wealth and prosperity and to eliminate any negative chi from the past.

Pagans celebrate the New Year during *Samhain* a Gaelic harvest festival held October 31–November 1. *Samhain* marks the end of the harvest season, the end of the "lighter half" of the year and beginning of the "darker half".

Jews look forward to the New Year during *Rosh Hashanah* (literally "head of the year"), which occurs in the autumn. In Jewish liturgy *Rosh Hashanah* is described as "the day of judgment" and "the day of remembrance," with God sitting upon a throne, while books containing the deeds of all humanity are opened for review, and each person passes in front of God for evaluation of his or her behavior over the last year.

In 2012 Muslims await the New Year on November 14th, which is the first day of the month of *Muharram* and marks the beginning of the Islamic liturgical year. The Islamic New Year is celebrated relatively quietly, with prayers and readings from the Koran.

So what *is* so special about this day, January first? While January first as a celebration dates back to Imperial Rome, it wasn't officially recognized until the Gregorian calendar was adopted throughout Europe in the 1750s. Over the last two and half centuries it has grown to become the closest thing we have to a global holiday, transcending religion and geography to unite the human family in marking time and ushering in the New Year following a calendar we've all agreed to follow. What's special about this day for Christians is largely what we choose to make of it.

In the West we have the tendency to focus on the "new" of the New Year. Since the 1960's *TIME* magazine has been tracking the new years resolutions of Americans, and there is a

remarkable similarity year in and year out as to what appears on our list of top choices:

1. Stop smoking
2. Exercise and get fit
3. Lose weight
4. Enjoy life more
5. Quit drinking

Now I'm not knocking new years resolutions. Over the years I've embraced several on this list. There is a kind of faith behind this resolution-making; the practice represents American optimism at its best, that we can all be better people tomorrow. I know a number of folks whose new years resolutions have been truly transformative.

But in large measure, this faith in new years resolutions is not supported by the evidence. If we could consistently make good on our new year's resolutions, they wouldn't be such hardy perennials, cropping up in familiar form year after year.

In 2011 *TIME* magazine, in addition to polling about new years resolutions, asked its representative sample for a list of resolutions that are most frequently broken:

1. Lose weight and get fit
2. Quit smoking
3. Learn something new
4. Eat healthier and diet
5. Get out debt and save money

Let me offer a counterintuitive and what will surely be an unpopular suggestion for this New Years. On a day when most people are looking to the future and making their list of resolutions, take a moment and dwell on your regrets instead.

Some years ago actor Johnny Depp was engaged to Winona Rider, and had tattooed on his right shoulder the words, "Winona Forever." Three years later, they broke up. And not wanting to face his regret, this daily tattooed reminder that his relationship hadn't worked out, Depp got some painful cosmetic work done, having the last two letters on the name "Winona" removed. Now his shoulder reads, "Wino forever." I'm not sure about the trade-off!

Now I know many of us pride ourselves on having no regrets. All of us make mistakes and do dumb things. 'I made the best choices I could,' we say to ourselves, 'choices that got me where I am today and I wouldn't change any of them.' In other words, I have drunk the cultural Kool Aid about regret, which is lamenting things that have occurred in the past is a waste of time, we should always look forward and not backward, and one of the noblest and best things we can do is to live a life free of regret.

This idea is captured nicely by this quote: "Things without all remedy should be without regard; what's done is done." At first glance this may seem like an admirable philosophy.

Until you discover who said this: Lady Macbeth, basically telling her husband to stop being such a wuss and feeling so bad for murdering people.

Shakespeare is on to something here. Because the inability to experience regret is actually one of the diagnostic characteristics of sociopaths. Our openness to deal with regret, our vulnerability in moving through regret is what helps make us humane, more fully human.

Here's a small symbol of regret in my work life: "Reply to all." I've lost count of the number of times I've received a group e-mail, and wanting to respond to one person in the group but not the others, I mistakenly hit the "reply to all" button. Only to end up apologizing in one form or another.

Here's a potential boat-load of regret for baby boomers looking forward to an empty nest: hundreds of thousands of college graduates who moved back in with their parents last spring because they couldn't find a job, the so-called boomerang generation whose economic circumstances are at least temporarily reshaping American family life.

Regret. The tiny Christian communities that were the recipients of the book of Revelation were filled with regret. Their experience of life at the end of the first century through beginning of the second is difficult for us to grasp. Their expectation that Christ would return had not materialized. The surrounding culture was hostile to their faith and communal life. Some of their leaders had been persecuted and martyred. Many others were in such despair they felt like the end of the world was upon them; they were ready to give up.

For this community John the Evangelist pens a letter filled with bizarre images, vivid descriptions of the end times and visions of the world to come. Some in the Christian community today have taken these images literally, as if the Book predicts future events. But Revelation is less about predicting the future and more about proclaiming Good News in troubling times, less about Tim Lahaye's popular *Left Behind* series and more about comfort and encouragement to a people in great distress, less about an escapist theology and more about the presence and triumph of God, who is making all things new *in this world*, in the most regret-filled moments of our lives.

Echoing the sentiment of John the Evangelist, Theologian Paul Tillich reminds us that ultimately, "there is one power that surpasses the all-consuming power of time-the eternal: He who was and is and is to come, the beginning and the end. He gives us forgiveness for what has passed. He gives us courage for what is to come. He gives us rest in His eternal Presence."¹

What regrets large and small do you bring to this New Years Day? A retirement portfolio that tanked, again? Kids or grandkids who made some bad choices last year? Someone at work you're not getting along with? A job opportunity that didn't materialize? An

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 122-32.

important relationship that's withering? An empty nest that is disappointedly not so empty?

Regret has a way of reminding us that we are not always in control, even when we feel like we are; that we do not have the power to see into the future, or return to the past and undo what has been done.

Before we start scribbling out those new years resolutions once again, let's not forget that the path to the future travels through the past. We can choose this New Years to deal with our regrets, or we can make other choices. Choosing to feel nothing—numbing ourselves. Choosing to perfect, perform and please our way out of regret. Choosing rage, cruelty or cynicism. Choosing shame or blame. Or we can take the risk proposed by John the Evangelist: to look deeply and honestly at the truth of who we've been, making ourselves vulnerable before God, and opening ourselves to the only power that surpasses the all consuming power of time, the only power that can heal *every* regret past present and future: the God in our midst who is making all things new.

There's nothing special about January first. It's what we choose to make of this day that really matters.

Amen.