

Arvada
United Methodist Church

August 23, 2009

“Behold! The Waters of Life”
Isaiah 43: 16, 18-19; Rev. 21: 1-6

Rev. Valerie Oden

I remember being in Jr. High, sitting at the dinner table after church, and my dad—for those of you who don’t know, my dad was a minister—my dad asked what we talked about in Sunday School.

“Seals,” said I.

“Seals?” asked Dad.

“Yes, seals,” said I. “You know, arh arh arh.”

“Why were you talking about seals in Sunday School?”

“They were in the Bible.”

“Seals in the Bible? There aren’t any seals near Bible lands.”

“I dunno... That’s what it said... seven seals.”

“Ohhh...ooohh nooo...” says Dad. “You mean the seven seals from the Book of Revelation...”

“Yea, that’s them. And Beasts,” said I.

“Beasts...” repeated Dad.

“Yea, fiery beasts, with wings. I think they were like dragons. There was fire *everywhere*. And horses flying. It was cool.”

“Cool,” echoed Dad.

And then he put his head in his hands and said, “I have *got* to find a new Sunday School teacher for that class.”

The vision of John described in the Book of Revelation is a favourite of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters. John says he’s writing as fast as Jesus is revealing to him this picture of the end time—how it will come about, what it will be like.

Most of our liberal traditions tip our hats to it around the new year, and then leave it lie the rest of the year. We can’t really be bothered with visions of seven seals and winged horses and fiery beasts.

But if you read it as story, and as poetry, and as metaphor, it paints quite a picture, quite a vision. Oh that any of us could have such a vision!

What is this business of a new heaven and a new earth? What is this business of God doing something new that permeates our scriptures?

Brad read from the Prophet Isaiah:

*Behold, I am doing a new thing,
Even now it is springing to light.
Do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43: 18*

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Ezekiel echoes the sentiment:

*I will give them a new heart,
And I will put a new spirit within them. Ez. 11: 19*

I know there are some of us saying, “New, new new. Enough of the new! There’s enough change in life—give me what is old and stable and tried and true!” The All New Kraft Macaroni and Cheese? No thank you! Give me the old original! But no worries, for the Poet of Ecclesiastes is on our side. He says,

*Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
What has been is what shall be;
What has gone on is what shall go on;
And there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said:
Lo, this is new?
It was already in existence in the ages
Which were before us. Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9-10.*

To which the Apostle Paul replies:

Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, all things have become new. I Corinthians 5:17.

The great theologian Paul Tillich asks in his great sermon “Behold! I Am Doing a New Thing”: “Why do these writers feel and speak in this way? Why do they prefer the new to the old, and why do they believe that God is the God of the new? Why do they demand and expect the new birth, the new heart, the new [hu]man, the new covenant, the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth?” The questions of Paul Tillich.

What is it with our Scriptures and newness? Why, indeed, do they needle us with newness? What is it with God and newness?

You’ve heard the saying from Heraclitus—You cannot step into the same river twice. Always the river is changing, new water from upstream flowing in and changing it. So it is with life. Always changing, every moment, moving, flowing, becoming new. From the first soupy, swirly darkness, God creates life, our story tells us. And then comes light. Out of darkness. From there, the vegetation, the creepy crawly things the animals, the humans. But of course, we weren’t, at first, standing up walking. That was something new too. Building shelters and staying put was new once.

Buddha comes along, says it’s not suffering that’s the human problem, but our attachments to things that causes suffering. To be free from suffering, be freed from attachment. That was new.

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Then Jesus arrives on the scene. Says Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Forgive 70 times 7. Welcome everyone to the table, no matter what. Reach out to the poor, the marginalized. Don't follow the law at the expense of love. And he gives a "new" commandment that supersedes all others: Love one another. That was new. Newness is the way of things, the movement of life.

We humans began building machines that could fly through the air—that was new. So was the atom bomb. And dropping it. Some countries having nuclear weapons is new. And the Broncos having a winning season...

And lest we believe that nothing new can be created, let's look at the Swine Flu. That's life adapting, becoming new. Not the kind of new we humans like, but from *its* perspective that little bug is just doing what life does—adapting to new conditions in order to thrive. I heard on NPR this week that the Dutch Government has created a video game to give out to teenagers or other gamers. Your goal in the game is to find a way to distribute the Swine Flu vaccine to the world, considering all the logistical challenges like economics, transportation, publicity, registration, etc. Asking our kids to help the world solve a global challenge is new.

Newness can be simply a perspective that moves up from our depths and out into how we see things and approach life. Like Marilyn Willeford, the mother of our Choir Director Debbie. Marilyn took a fall a month ago and was in the Life Care Rehab Center for some time. While there, she started coordinating social events for the other patients. And as she went home this week, she told Debbie, "I think I'm going to volunteer to help those old people." She is 83.

Or there's Sherry Marti's grandmother, who was "bringing the old people to church" at the spry young age of 91.

Such a perspective requires a heart infused with newness, not confined to what feels old. But what about those among us who would love to be able to bring the old people to church and just aren't physically able? Are they left out of this business of God's newness? Certainly not, if we're talking about a freshness of heart, of soul, of spirit, that is offered each moment by the divine source of life, an *internal* quality that abides in any outer circumstance.

We get a sense of this quality of newness when we look into the eyes of a babe. Or watch young lovers. Or see the dance of a new parent holding their first born infant. As the folks in Brown Bag Bible Study said this week, that parent is *sure* that no one else has ever done this before on the face of the earth. Is it possible that we are all meant to see the world through the same freshness of heart?

Eternal meaning is being injected into each mundane moment. Tillich calls it the "eternal now." This moment, now, given *eternal* meaning. This moment, now, infused with a quality so profound that we might call it eternal.

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If such an infusion is the way of things, then we are not really separate from eternity, now, as a quality rather than a timeline. The kingdom of heaven is within, says Jesus. The eternal now, abiding in our hearts, and we in it.

Call it God. Call it the spirit of life. Call it the life force, the creative energy, the higher power. Call it what you want, but it is always beckoning life into something new. You and I may not see visions of winged creatures and seven seals and fiery beasts. Perhaps we will not see peace spread across the earth in our lifetime. Perhaps our wishes for transforming what is staid in our own surface lives into something new and fresh will not occur in some discernible way. But within our hearts, inside, where grace begins, all things are being made new, even now.

It is as simple as a breath—letting our hearts be made new, fresh. It is as simple as a “yes.” Regardless of what stale, patterned oldness is occurring in our outer lives, inside our hearts we are being made new, now. Eternally. That is the power of grace. That is the movement of love. That is the good news. Amen.