

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Looking Forward to Change"  
Dr. J. Dent

December 30, 2007  
(New Year Readings)

I've been told the farther west you go in this country, the less traditional and more experimental the culture becomes. I've also been told that the contrary is true as well: That the most traditional and culturally conservative people in the country live here. Now I didn't say conservative politically, or economically, but culturally. As a corollary, this means that people in the church here like it the way it is, and the way it is is the way we have always done it. You know what one church growth expert has said to identify the seven words which destroy a congregation: "We've never done it that way before."

But the reality of every living organization and organism is change. To live, to grow, we must change. Now most of you know that I am conservative theologically and that I don't believe that we should change the Apostles' Creed or the basic tenets of the faith. If we do that, then we should declare ourselves Unitarian/Universalists. They believe in complete freedom of religious thought. A fellow student at Seminary told me that Jesus was irrelevant and that she would be happy to receive into her organization anyone who thought outside the constricting box of dogma that Christians hold as true. But Christians, while amazingly diverse in a number of applications of the faith, still believe a core number of truths to be Christian. While there are hundreds of denominations, there is only one Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. So while the faith remains sure and the core of what we believe, nevertheless, the application and practice of that faith needs to continually be renewed.

Such a renewal or reformation is at the heart of our denominational identity. And while many would disagree on exactly how we do this, we all agree it is vital to staying a living, growing church. The Bible indeed reminds us over and over that there are seasons we go through, not only in the physical world, but also in our lives, in our personal experiences and in our congregations. Ecclesiastes says this most pointedly, from which many songs have been written, including "To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn and a time for every purpose under heaven..." (Pete Seeger and The Byrds)

The preacher Qohelet, in Ecclesiastes has learned much from life and realizes that much in life doesn't make sense in itself, but only in the context of relationship to the Creator. Work, power, riches, resources, health, ability, strength all change throughout life, but the main thing is to remember the main thing: Honour your Creator while you can, as young as you can. And remember that young means today rather than tomorrow. If you do, then you will know the fullness of life, otherwise you get sidetracked with the many other activities of life which aren't bad in themselves but become idols in competition with the One who is meant to be the ultimate Manager and Director.

So while much does change in life, this constant holds us on track. True worship keeps our lives and hearts in the right place. So if you are making resolutions this year: Make sure weekly corporate worship and daily private worship become your first priority. Without these, your life is guaranteed to be out of balance, no matter how balanced you are in all the other areas of your life. This is what Psalm 8 says over and over. "O Lord our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth..."

Revelation 21, the penultimate chapter of the whole Bible, also reminds us of the changing nature at the end of time as well. The apostle John sees a new heaven and a new earth. The new city that becomes the home of believers has traits of the garden of Eden, the Temple and Jerusalem. The physics and composition of the city makes it something completely new or simply symbolic of something John saw that he could only use his experience and language to describe, a 1500 mile cube. So newness and change will be a part of what heaven is all about. So change in itself is an ongoing part of life and growth. What changes will God bring about in your life in 2008? How will He once again get your attention and show you His love for you?

The Gospel reminds us as a church that a large part of what we are to do as church can be described as "mercy ministries." How we are achieving our goals is measured more by our outreach, our mercy, our faithfulness to the Gospel and our relationship to the Lord, more than by our financial offerings and Sunday attendance. Now this doesn't mean the Lord doesn't care about what you give and whether you make the effort to come to worship. I've already said that these should be a priority for every Christian. But it does mean that we as a church need to remind ourselves often that we are a group

that does not exist for itself, but for others. We can only keep what we give away, from God's point of view.

So the elders of this congregation (me included) need to be reminded of the challenge to constantly be giving away of the gifts we have here to the community, to those in need, to those who spiritually are far off from God. Relationship to God comes first, and we need to be creative in every context to invite others into this relationship. Then on the basis of that relationship, we care for others, we love others because we were first loved by the One who created love and relationship.

We will be challenged in many ways in the coming year. We will be asked to summon our creativity by the grace of God to meet the spiritual needs of the young and the elderly, the middle aged and young adults, the children and the retired. Together we can minister to everyone who comes here. Together we can go beyond these walls to people from every corner of the earth. Together we can make this a dynamic and powerful ministry. But such a ministry has a cost. It costs us first of all time and energy, then money, then it calls our priorities into question once again. In the newsletter, I suggested everyone try an exercise of seeing where their time goes. You might be surprised. And did you see the youtube video of the choir?

Each of us should spend a half hour in exercise appropriate to our age, health condition and situation in life. Each of us should spend at least a half hour in spiritual exercise of prayer and Scripture reading everyday. Each of us can do this, but it takes discipline and a plan. It takes a willingness to change.

Similarly, for the congregation, together we need to consecrate another time during the week where several of us meet. I'm suggesting that such a time be Wednesday nights, and that we have adequate church space for church meetings. I'm not sure what to call it yet, but it will be a kind of exploration of our faith together which does not suppose that you have a huge background in Bible or Christian faith. It will be a place where it is safe to ask questions, but also be a place where there are answers and not simply confusion.

I'm hoping that many of you are looking for a place during the week to be exploring your commitment to God. This building, the Sanctuary and the

Hall, have been set aside for this very primary purpose. While it will continue to be used by many outside groups, I'm hoping that it will also be more and more used by the Church itself and the Church's mission and outreach.

None of this is earth shaking or innovative, it is simply an attempt to return to the roots which provide our nourishment. And it is an invitation to choose a small amount of personal change to make your life better. It is safe to say that anyone who wants to look at resolutions for the New Year should look at their spirituality, at what they are doing in relationship to God.

I hope this provides a brief and hopeful outlook for some of the changes in the New Year. We will all experience change this year, some wonderful, some very difficult. Yet as we face each day, we have God as our adhesive, and we have one another.

Let's entrust 2008 to our Lord.

Let us pray.