

Jeremiah 31:7-14
John 1:10-18

Renewal
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Have some you already broken a New Year's resolution? Maybe you have given up making them. A friend of ours announced a few years ago, "My New Year's resolution is to not make any New Year's resolutions!" Or, maybe you are like the Hallmark character Maxine: "I love the promise of a New Year! This year, for example, I promise to be even crabbier than usual."

However, there is something in most of us that longs for change or renewal. There are things we wish we could change, words we wish we could unsay, habits we wish we could break. We long for a sense of renewal in our lives and in our world.

Jeremiah writes of the joy of renewal. The joy of return. Jeremiah's words are to those about to go into exile. They are not there yet, but it looms in their future. Jeremiah seeks to assure them that this will not last forever; renewal will come. God will again redeem/renew the people of God. Everyone will be welcomed back. It will be a time of rejoicing and celebration – renewal. God's grace will be felt in the land. A shepherd, God's shepherd, will lead his flock with tenderness and mercy. God will again be felt in the land.

As we turn to John's Gospel we discover the grace promised has come. Not only did the Word become flesh but it has come and lived among us. Yet, though God was in our midst the world did not recognize the very presence of its creator.

I remember a Ladies Aid meeting on Halloween. I had taken some things over to them and was enjoying some coffee and fellowship before heading off (Diane was teaching and unable to attend so I delivered some things for her). As we were getting ready to sit down the hostess looked out her kitchen window and saw a bag woman, a gypsy hobbling up the driveway. She quickly grabbed me, pushed me to the door and told me to "get rid of her." As I went to the door I watched her walk up the walk, I thought I recognized her gait. As she saw me at the door she smiled and winked. After we chatted for a minute I opened the door wider and invited her in (There were several minor heart attacks in the room; this is not the type of person we invite into our homes. If looks could kill I would not be standing before you today!). You could sense the uncomfortableness in the room as she walked in. And the greater distress when they discovered who she was, one of us.

God comes and the world does not recognize his coming. Renewal comes and no one is ready for it. Law has become grace.

There is a renewal of our understanding of God and how God relates to the world. John reminds us that the Law came through Moses. The rules and regulations of what it takes to be a follower of God. Laws that were really somewhat simplistic rules and regulations for living. However, over the years the simple Laws have become complicated as they were interpreted and explained.

One of our favorite television programs is Bones. One Christmas program had them locked in the lab because of a possible contamination. As they were resigned to spend Christmas day in lock down, away from their families, they decided to have "secret Santas." But how do you decide? Several had complicated formulas to determine who selected who. The FBI agent involved took some paper and put their names in a hat (while they were arguing the best way to choose) and said, "Take one; if you get your own name put it back and take another." After a moment, someone said, "Oh yes, that will work too!"

The Law had become complicated over the centuries. Keeping the Law or the requirements dictated by the interpretations had become almost impossible. The rich young ruler came to Jesus with a request about keeping the Law. What are the minimal

requirements to keep the Law? To get into heaven? Even today there is discussion about what is required to keep the Law. You may have read this fall that a leading Rabbi in Israel has said that using “Sabbath elevators” is now breaking the Law. Sabbath elevators are ones that are programmed to stop on every floor on the Sabbath – to push a button is work, if you don’t have to push a button then riding the elevator has been considered okay, it is not work. At least that was until this recent ruling. Now even these elevators are seen to break the Law in the interpretation of this one Rabbi. You can take the stairs but only so many steps (five or six floors) because beyond that you would break the Law, too many steps on the Sabbath is work and... Thus, some people are now confined to their homes on the Sabbath or they have to stay with others or they break the Law. Another rule or regulation that must be followed or else.

John writes that Christ came bringing “*grace upon grace.*” Or as the NIV translates, “*one blessing after another.*” A new order has come. The results of which should be the celebration that Jeremiah speaks about. There should be singing, dancing and joy in the streets. God has again redeemed a people; renewal has exploded on the scene. Grace has come--God has come and lived among us. Something new is happening. “*Yet the world did not know him*” (John 1:10b).

Do we know him? How has God renewed our lives?

Faith is a paradox. It is private and personal. I cannot make faith decisions for you or anyone other than myself. We have to make our own faith decisions. BUT, faith is also corporate. We live it out in community. It is in community we find the strength to live out our personal faith journeys.

How have we renewed the world? Some of the renewals we have brought to the world as Christians have been positive. We have founded hospitals, orphanages, elder care, feeding programs and the world is a better place because of the work started and still continued through the Church.

However, we have also done some “not so good” things in the world. We have tried to force and coerce people to faith. We forget Jesus only invited, he never forced anyone into a relationship with him. We have added limits and conditions to what it means to be a follower of Christ. Some have said we preach grace but live the Law. Our image is tarnished by the “not so good” we have been responsible for. We have forgotten, “*grace upon grace.*”

And in doing so, we have lost a sense of renewal for the world. We have forgotten the promises of joy and celebration and renewal. Our private faith must be a public faith – it is not one or the other but both lived out in the midst of a community in renewal.

Christmas coming marks the beginning of God’s renewal in the world. As we come to this table we are reminded not only of Bethlehem but of his death and resurrection—God’s promise of grace fulfilled in Christ. We come not because we have been able to live up to the Law but because of God’s grace given in Bethlehem. Or in John’s words, “*grace upon grace*” or “*one blessing after another.*” This is our greatest renewal, “*But to all who received him, who believed on his name, he gave the power to become children of God.*”

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCCL/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Peterson, Eugene, The Message, Zondervan, 2004,2006