

Sermon 1-01-10

1 Corinthians 4:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 43:18-21

The Importance of Place: Emsworth UP Church

I woke up Friday morning the same way I wake up most mornings, following the same routine and going about the same things that I normally do. Opening the paper, I was reminded that Friday was January 1, the start of a new year. As a child, this would have been a big deal for me. Back then, I was fascinated by the change in the year; actually believing that something new could happen. With anticipation I waited up the night before for that ball to drop in Times Square, almost as if it magically signaled the start of something fresh and new. Now, I'm just plain boring. "What's so new about it," I think to myself. The bills still need to be paid, things still need fixed around the house, the garbage still goes out Tuesday evening; there isn't anything all that new. Just the same old stuff with different numbers behind it. There's no magic watching a ball drop in Times Square, unless of course it signals my bedtime. Life in the church is just as similar.

The changeover from December to January happens without much fanfare or pomp. Part of that is due to the fact that the Christian liturgical new year begins on the first Sunday of Advent and not on the changeover for the calendar. But on the other side of things, Sunday still occurs on the same day of the week, the bills still need to be paid, the ways of doing things don't really change all that much. Life in the church can often feel like the same old stuff with different numbers behind it. 2010 doesn't really feel all that different from 2009, or 1999 for that matter. In both cases, the focus is on us – on what we are doing. What we often overlook in this way of thinking is what God might be doing in the

midst of a church; the ways God is working and moving and calling a church to a new way of seeing itself.

In turning to Isaiah, we discover a passage that bears witness to the freshness of God's ministry. Proclaimed to a people who are living in exile from their homeland, Isaiah gets to the heart of what God's ministry looks like. He tells the people not to remember the former things or consider the things of old. We might find this to be a little striking, even odd for that matter, but what is being rejected is any sense of nostalgia; any sense of living in the past for the sake of the future. The implication is that when the focus is solely on the past, solely on the traditions and ways of living long since passed, the people's attention is not focused on what God is up to in their midst. From there, the next part of the passage bears witness to the sheer wonder of God's dealings within the world: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Suddenly, God presents a challenge to his people. God calls them away from their lethargy and their nostalgia; he calls them away from the past, challenging them to be attentive and to think about His present work in the world. For the Lord God is not a god of what could have been or the god of what might be; this is the Lord God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, who heals the broken, brings freedom for slaves, and brings redemption to a world and to a people who are badly in need of some good news of great joy.

This reading from Isaiah holds a special place in my heart. Not only are the words of the prophet powerful, they are the theme for my life in ministry this year. "Do not remember the former things," proclaims Isaiah, "or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Spoken to a people who are living in exile, cut off from their home and wondering if God has any purpose for them

anymore, the Word of the Lord comes to his people to remind them that he is not yet finished with them. They are critical words left for us to hear as well for they force us to think of about what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in this place. These words call us to be attentive to the mission and ministry of God in the world and to remember the calling to which we have been called.

It's easy to think that we're just here to gather together for worship on Sunday mornings only to go off to our own little corners of the world to do as we please. It's also easy to assume that it's still 1950; that folks will come rolling through the doors of the church simply because a church exists and effective evangelism involves going door to door. Except, that isn't the way of things anymore. What might have worked in the past does not necessarily mean that it will work tomorrow. But it's more than that. Over the last few years, I've listened to your stories. I've heard of the wonderful things God has done in the midst of this place. I've also heard time and again how we've lost so many wonderful saints over the years – saints whose passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ was an inspiration and a witness to many. Yet, what good is that memory if we refuse to carry forward and be the saints of God in 2010? That's the real rub of Isaiah's words, "do not remember the former things or consider the things of old." Isaiah isn't saying that the past isn't important nor is he suggesting that what has happened in the past wasn't a witness to God's work in the world. Rather, he is saying that we shouldn't live in the past at the expense of the new things the Lord our God is about to do.

This church was planted 140 years ago with a purpose and with a mission; standing firm throughout those 140 years as a symbol and a witness that God is not done with the community of Emsworth. Our mission as the body of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior has

been simple, to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). This means that we are concerned with the glory of God, we are concerned about the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the community of Emsworth, and we have been open to the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us throughout our lifespan. But when we only remember the former things – the days when the pews were filled with warm bodies, families streamed in here, and people within the community knew we were here – we make ourselves blind to the new things that our Lord is doing even now.

Now, some of you might be wondering why we've spent the last five weeks looking at the importance of place within scripture. Friends, it was all in preparation for looking at the one place we always overlook: What is Jesus Christ doing in this place out of the freedom of his love and power? Where is he working, who is he calling us to be, and where is he leading us to get in on the new things he is already doing?

I think we haven't struggled enough with this question over the years. Part of the reason we haven't struggled with it is we get stuck in the rut of the every day things that occur. We're comfortable knowing what to anticipate and we're comfortable with things carrying on the way they always have been. Why? We get stuck in the rut of every day things because we fear change. We fear the unknown of what is unanticipated and the unknown that takes us out from beyond our comfort levels. Change scares the living daylight out of us. Another reason we don't struggle with the question of what Jesus is up to is that we don't really believe that God is up to much of anything within this tiny church. Sure, he's up to something when it comes to our mission giving, but for the most part, we don't spend a lot of time actively discerning what Jesus is doing here. Too often all of us become content with simply going through the motions, focusing on the former things at

the expense of the new things Jesus is calling us to now. But I truly believe that this about to change.

The coming months are full of mystery and discernment but it is critical for us that we look towards the glorious opportunities left open before us; it's important that we discern the ways we can get in on Jesus mission and ministry within our community. But it's not enough to say that Jesus is doing a new thing here among us and then continue along as we've been for the past few years. It's not enough to simply assume that someone else is going to do the work. If that's the case then we might as well pack up our toys, liquidate our assets, and go home. But that's not why I'm here and I hope that's not why you're here. Our response-ability is to discern where Jesus is working here and now, to see where lives are being transformed, and to roll up our sleeves and be a part of his work. Because Jesus Christ is faithful to us we are called and blessed to be a part of his mission work in this place and within this community.

The challenge for us is to remain open and attentive to the freedom of our Lord to do a new thing with the life of this little church. Thinking of the importance of place does not end with the locations we read in scripture, for we must question again and again what our Lord is doing in this place, in Emsworth UP Church. What is the importance of this place, of this church, for the work of the Lord our God who is made known to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit? Who are the lost, the hurt, and the broken that Jesus is already ministering to, inviting us to participate within his saving work? What is the new thing Jesus is already doing that we aren't yet able to perceive? Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.