

‘What’s new?’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 14th June 2009

What’s new? How do you react when someone asks you this.’ Perhaps a friend has not seen you for a while and she asks: ‘What’s new?’ Whoever asks it, what are people saying with the words ‘What’s new?’ Usually, I believe, they are simply asking us what is going on in our lives. It’s a general sort of question, leaving us to reply with anything that is significant to us. ‘What’s new?’, however, surely implies that something may have changed since they last saw us. The questioner is expectant, interested in what has happened to us since last we met. Maybe we feel a bit inadequate if there is nothing much to tell. ‘Not much’, we may reply, perhaps wondering if our friend is disappointed that we don’t live a more interesting life. On the other hand, perhaps people don’t really expect us to come out with much that is genuinely new. Some of you may have heard me quote the reply my brother Michael gave to someone who asked him early 2006: ‘What’s new? Michael replied: ‘Well, my sister has married an American; my brother is marrying a Russian; and my boss is having a sex-change.’ Michael says that his friend looked somewhat astonished by his reply. He had probably just been expecting: ‘Same old, same old’ whilst for my brother the year since he had seen this friend had been truly momentous. Three people who mattered to him and who he thought he knew fairly well had done the totally unexpected; his sister had married an American; his brother had become engaged to a Russian; and his boss was changing from a man into a woman. ‘What’s new?’ The answer in this case was ‘Many things.’

There’s another tone used sometimes with the phrase: ‘What’s new?’ It is one of cynicism; the very opposite of genuine interest or expectation. We may hear of someone known for not replying to letters, emails or phone calls not giving any response to a recent enquiry. ‘She hasn’t got back to me’ we may say, adding, disparagingly: ‘What’s new?’ ‘What do you expect?’ from someone who seldom bothers to reply. It truly is the same old, same old. ‘What’s new?’ The answer in this case is: ‘Nothing’.

Well, how do you feel this morning when from the pulpit I ask the question: ‘What’s new?’ from the pulpit. Do you feel that I’m being cynical about the Christian faith and our worship? Many years ago, I did once hear someone say she didn’t come to church because she had heard it all before. Centuries ago, weren’t some people deaf to the good news Jesus brought because they thought they had heard it all before. They were not listening expectantly. They certainly did not expect that people would be miraculously fed and healed. So what about each of you this morning? What is new for you this day? As you come to worship and prepare to start the next week: how do you reply to the question: ‘What’s new?’

Each Sunday during our Summer schedule, we are beginning our worship service with a couple favorite hymns selected from those you have requested. I haven’t seen the list that our choir director has but I believe that it is a long one. Most of us have a favorite hymn – at least one. The hymn might have become meaningful to us on a

particular occasion or we may just like it without really knowing why. One of the hymns we sang at my mother's funeral because it was one of her particular favorites is one that is very popular, both in her and my homecountry of Britain and in this country. It is, I believe, popular in many parts of the world and so is sung in many languages. The hymn is 'Great is thy faithfulness'. I remember my mother telling me in some quite difficult times that the line she most treasured from this hymn was: 'Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.' It does, indeed, sum up all we need from God, doesn't it? Each of us needs strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Do you know what book of the Bible inspired this wonderful hymn? If not, can you guess? You might imagine that the writer must be feeling especially happy and healthy. If he sees new mercies 'morning by morning', as the hymn says, he must surely be living in pleasant circumstances, the economy of his people must be booming and all around him must be sweetness and light. If this is what you are thinking, how wrong can you be? For the writer of the lines that are echoed in this hymn is living in a land that has suffered the full horrors of invasion by powerful enemies. Its capital city has been captured, looted, and destroyed; the king and all capable of exercising religious and political leadership have been taken into exile or fled the country for safety. There is no political future. And, worst of all for our writer, he has had the heart of his faith ripped out. The place of worship which to him and his people has signified God's presence has been razed to the ground.

Now you might have been imagining someone looking east watching the sun come up over a beautiful river as the one to pen the lines that inspired: 'morning by morning new mercies I see'. Not a bit of it. The author is, indeed, looking east, but not to admire the sunrise. Rather he is looking from the desolate city of Jerusalem to the far-off land of Babylon, from which his enemies have come and to which they have carted off his leaders. Our author is the one who penned the book of Lamentations, traditionally known as the Lamentations of Jeremiah. In fact, we do not know who wrote the book, and it does not much matter what his name was. In a sense, he is every man who sees all his hopes and dreams wrecked. But instead of this making him give up his faith in God, rather it makes him all the more certain of it.

It is precisely in the context of Jerusalem in ruins along with the rest of Judah that we find the words that inspired the hymn that is so familiar to us. Let me read these words to you. (Lamentations 3:21-23) Now there is another hymn inspired by this same passage and, all the time I was preparing this sermon, I could not get it out of my head. I have not heard it sung in the United States so far and it is not in the United Methodist hymnal, but it is a hymn 'I was raised on', so to speak. Its first line is the best one: 'New every morning is the love.' It is by the poet, priest, and theologian, John Keble and it is usually sung to the tune 'Melcombe'. This is not a tune I especially like. I find it a bit spite of this, Nonetheless, this tune, with its words inspired by our passage in Lamentations, would not leave me all last week as I thought about our theme this morning: what's new?

So what is new? What does it mean for something to be new? In the passage from his second letter to the Corinthians that I've just read, Paul uses the word 'new' more than once. The simple answer to the question: 'What's new?' for the Christian, says Paul, is 'everything'. Because of God's steadfast love in Christ, we can become new, not in the sense of something recent, but in the sense of something quite different from our old selves.

This past week, Stephen and I have attended the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The last two years I have attended the event in Lakeland, but this year it was held in Daytona Beach, at Bethune Cookman University. Where we were staying happened to be just round the corner from the jewelers where Stephen took me in December 2004 to choose an engagement ring. Just passing this store evoked in me all the excitement of newness: a new experience of being in Florida, the new experience of spending time with different members of Stephen's family, and most of all, of new love.

What is the writer of our passage in Lamentations meaning when he says that God's love is 'new every morning'? Though he is writing against the backdrop of changed circumstances for his beloved city of Jerusalem and his whole country of Judah, he is putting his trust and hope in a love that does not change. He is absolutely confident of this. He may be lamenting many things that pain him, that bring him anger and regret, but his belief in God is not one of them. There is no hint in the book of Lamentations of a lost faith. Rather, in the midst of everything else falling apart, our writer expresses his sense of God's steadfast love. He speaks of God's mercies that are new every morning. These are the words that have inspired the lines in the hymn: 'Great is thy faithfulness' – 'Thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not'. And these are the lines that have inspired the hymn: 'New every morning is the love.' In turn, the words have inspired many believers, especially in thin times.

'What's new?' John Keble answers in his hymn 'The love', God's love. That's what's new, every single morning. We do not have to wake up wondering whether God has changed, whether he has run out of love for us. Do you ever wake with the anxiety about a family relationship, that somehow things are not right between you and someone else? This may be because of some particular upset that has occurred or it may be just a general feeling of unease. This feeling may be justified, of course, and there may be something you have to do to put things right. More often, there is nothing wrong except a fear that we may have done something to affect the relationship. Often, I believe, this stems from an exaggeration of our deserving someone else's approval, even love. So far as God is concerned, there is nothing we can do that will make him love us less. And there is nothing we can do that will make him love us more. A person's moral condition is irrelevant to God's love.

Perhaps we could ask ourselves just one simple question as we begin each day, before we have done anything else. The question is: 'What's new?' And the answer will always be the same. What's new is God's love for me. On some occasions, we

may just be thankful that there is a new morning at all. If, for instance, we had a sleepless night, especially one full of anxiety. Everything seems so much worse in the dark, doesn't it? It may be that for someone you know at the present-time waking up is something he or she regrets. That person may wish that a new day did not keep dawning. Someone may be feeling so bad physically or mentally that he wishes he could just sleep on – maybe even permanently, so that he does not have to face the pain that consciousness brings.

I was reading recently about a young grandmother who had been at the hospital with one of her daughters and her daughter's own little girl who was very seriously ill. This particular morning she stayed until 5.30 am and then came home for a little while to be with her other grandchildren when they woke up. I would like to share with you some of what she wrote about the experience:

How do we do this? How do we keep going? How can we be joyful, thankful, content and happy living the "life of cancer" month after month? People ask this on a daily basis. Answer: the same way YOU can keep going. The same way YOU can be joyful, thankful, content and happy day after day no matter what life throws at you. ... The answer is the same whether you're a parent of a child with Leukemia, ... a cheated-on spouse, an unfairly fired employee, or just someone dealing with the typical life struggles that conspire to rob us of joy and contentment. The answer is the same for the couple about to lose their house to foreclosure, ...for healthy active folks who don't feel loved or at peace ... or the older couple with seemingly-never-ending health problems. The answer is the same for Americans who take for granted unparalleled personal freedom and an unprecedented level of affluent lifestyle, or the multitudes of people across the globe who are hungry, poor, cold, imprisoned for their faith or beliefs, persecuted and largely ignored by the world. ... the answer to 'how do you keep going?' and 'how do you have joy and hope?' is the same for every single person in ANY situation, and here it is, my favorite passage, Lamentations 3: 20-25

As she reflects on this passage, our sorrowing grandmother writes:

I will call to mind that God's great love is NEVER consumed: it never ends; there is always more. I will call to mind that God's compassions NEVER fail; Hi compassions always WIN; in other words, if we avail ourselves of God's compassion, it is ALWAYS enough to overcome our sorrows no matter what they are. I will call to mind that God's love and compassion is NEW every morning. ... Why does God emphasize "every morning?" Does Hi compassion wear out by the end of the day and then overnight God gets back in gear and puts out a fresh batch when the sun comes up? "New every morning" is a point of reference for us. We all live day by day. The sun rises on every person, every day, in every situation. It is a guidepost, a marker, a timestamp that we can all related to, count on and understand. So God uses that inescapable reality to give us common ground that leaves none of us being able to say "I didn't understand, I wasn't aware ..." We all understand that the sun rises every day. We all understand that morning comes each day no matter WHAT WE ARE STRUGGLING WITH.

Every morning, for every person, God's love, compassion and mercies are 'new' and available. Not "new" in the sense that they got "old" or "worn" but "new" in the sense that they are waiting for us, without fail, with the dawn of each new day. They are "new" in that they are totally sufficient for whatever that day holds for us, even when our "soul is downcast" ... in fact, I would say ESPECIALLY when our soul is downcast.'

Like the author of the book of Lamentations, this woman knows what she is talking about. We will listen to her when she expounds our passage from Lamentations because she, like the author of Lamentations, speaks from experience. She, like him, knows what is to have to focus on God's love and compassion again and again. This love and compassion, she realizes, will be there no matter what we do, even if we ignore it. But, she says, God calls us to action if we want to benefit from it. We have to get our mind right. We have deliberately to focus on God's word and tell ourselves: 'God is enough. God is my hope. I will wait on God.'

The apostle Paul also spoke from experience. What's new for Paul was 'everything'. Availing ourselves of God's love in Christ, we become a new creation, every day. It is not that we are reinventing ourselves. It is that God is recreating us. We sang in our chorus this morning:

*I've been changed, I'm newborn now;
My life has been rearranged.
What a difference it made
When the Lord came and stayed
In my heart; Oh, yes, I've been changed.*

So in Paul's mind our faith in Jesus does not inoculate us against the reality of hardship, but reframes our life with Christ at the center – the Christ who suffered on our behalf. Paul reminds us that transformation is possible when, in the face of all our trials and tribulations, we invite Christ into our lives and enable him to make us a new creation from the inside out. We can be newborn each day as we allow God to subtract our anxieties, doubts, and fears, leaving room for trust and hope.

As we start not only our week in worship, but each day as our morning dawns, let's ask ourselves the question with genuine expectancy: 'What's new?' As we answer this question, let us remind ourselves of the freshness and power of God's love new for us every morning.