

March 27, 2022
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.



Last week it was waterfalls, and this week it is tiny sprigs of life inching their way up through the blanket of dead, dry, and decaying leaves that still cover the floor of the forest along many trails hiked in western North Carolina. As we mile after mile we observed hundreds, thousands of trees which had not yet transitioned from their winter hibernation in which their branches are bare, a hue of gray and browns still covered the canvass of creation, there around the next bend in the trail, hiding behind the trunk of a tree that has stood the test of time, tucked in behind a fallen tree via the winter winds and was now left in pieces, it's decaying insides split open for the world to see, my eyes caught the glimmer that new life continues to emerge. A tiny plant in its green luster. A small shoot of pine needling reaching up the sky seemingly giving glory to their creator for a new day. Small strands of hope this forest would soon be bursting forth with the song of spring and live into the fullness of its creation in providing shade for the many hikers relishing in its beauty, providing homes for the birds of the air soon to return and being a beacon of life yet again for creatures of the forest that are beginning to awake after a long winter. I placed a few of these pictures on Facebook and our website and posted a color copy next the worship bulletins picked up by you all present this morning.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

We have heard far too much talk about “new” over the last two years. Our lives have forever been altered by a “new” way of living and being. So, the last thing we may want to hear about is more “new.” But Paul doesn't give us a choice. He tells it like it is. Puts it out there for all to hear.

New can mean so many things. It all comes down to context. A new house, for instance, can usher in the hopes of new beginnings and a vision of the family that may be beginning, growing and the many memories that will be shared in that house. A new car might be a reward for all the years of study, time, energy, and hard work put in at a job. It's a treasure to behold and all you want to do is hop in and drive it around town to dwell in that “new” car scent, admire the luxury of heated seats you may not have had previously, and show off your new

pride and joy. At the beginning of a new year of school, a new semester of study, a new season of being part of an athletic team, etc. is often accompanied by thoughts, feelings and hopes of new beginnings. Maybe, the joy of being present together again in person. Maybe, leaving behind a season marred by injury or too many close losses and instead now resting in the hope of what lie ahead, what's possible as a new day dawns.

Yet, new also might be accompanied by uncertainty. It might come with the anxiety of a mortgage or car loan. It might come with the trepidation of leaving something beloved behind. It might come with grief and loss. It might mean hard work is on the horizon. New at times is forced upon us, as it was two years ago by a thief that came seemingly overnight. Henceforth, our hesitation possibly as we gather this morning to hear more talk about newness. We've had enough new for a while in our lives.

Yet, for Paul, this "new creation" isn't meant to be a source of anxiety amongst the Corinthians. It isn't supposed to be one more new thing to accomplish or purchase in a hope to make their lives better. It isn't supposed to come with the fear of the unknown or the heartache of something lost. Just the opposite, the "new creation" Paul speaks of is sheer grace. It's eternal hope. It ought well up in the community of believers a festive celebration in which the fatted calf is brought out for all to feast on. This new creation changes everything and creates a new way of being, seeing, and dwelling in the goodness and richness of God.

Like that Carolina forest with new sprigs breaking in upon it, they assure us God is not done. Creation continues to flourish. Winter will indeed give way to spring. Spring to summer. Death and decay to abundant life for all to bask in. These new signs of life breathe in us hope. Fill us with joy. Force us to stop and celebrate amidst the journey God's handiwork.

Sometimes we need a little new. The newness only Jesus offers. A reminder all is not lost. A glimpse into the fact the kingdom of God continues to be ushered in. The light of Christ continues to shine. His resurrection has changed everything. As Paul says on multiple occasion in his letter to the Corinthians prior to today's passage this is why he and his companions and the Corinthian church he is writing to does not lose heart. This hope, promise and act of love is their "treasurer in clay jars."

It seems Paul and his companions in ministry were in a season of decay with the Corinthian church they so loved and had watched grow from the infant stages of a small sprig of life breaking in upon a fallen world. Tensions amongst the two had set in and were a source of deep pain. Perhaps, brought on by so-called "super" apostles that had come proclaiming a message of Christ that was rooted not in love but something else. Casting a sense of empty promises and false hope. Leading the people away from the reconciling work of what God had done in Christ for all who believe. Shades of lost hope, despair, and perhaps despondency now covered the community of believers. It seems they may have even lost sight of their identity, were left struggling to see the resurrection life breaking in upon them and were lost in a forest of hopelessness.

Paul reminds them. He reminds us at the conclusion of chapter four, "Do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." There is always hope on the horizon. No, there is always hope right now. Paul uses the present tense and embedded in his usage of this act of God is the understanding this is a continuous and repeated action. This is the work of God in Christ Jesus. We are always becoming that which God is doing.

Even when the world looks dim. Even when we feel far from the loving arms of God. Even when divisions seem to rule the day. Even when we struggle to see the green shoots of new life emerging from the desolate and decaying places of our lives and the world. Behold, “There is a new creation! Everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God!”

In her book *Pastrix*, ELCA Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber speaks of the newness we have received through the death and resurrection of our Lord. She speaks to the fact shades of gray, the brokenness of the world, remnants of decay still remain while we reside in our earthly bodies. She writes, “God was never about making me spiffy; God was about making me new.” And then goes on,

New doesn’t always look perfect. Like the Easter story itself, new is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don’t actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I’m right. New looks like every fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn’t live without and then somehow living without it anyway. New is the thing we never saw coming—never even hoped for—but ends up being what we needed all along. It happens to all of us.ⁱ

People of God, we never lose heart. We are always being made new. Daily in our baptisms in which yet again we are clothed in the garment of Christ’s righteousness. His innocence. Daily in which we are yet again reconciled to God. Daily in which we hear and receive the amazing grace of forgiveness. When we catch a vision of the inbreaking of God’s kingdom, here and now, in our lives and in our community, it is this vision, this work of reconciliation. It makes all things new. The love of Christ. The reality of resurrection and the well-spring of eternal life that wells within us via the Holy Spirit urges us on and instills and equips in us the message of reconciliation. We become ambassadors for Christ. All things are possible!

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*; Jericho Books; copyright 2013; p. 174.