

January 10, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What will the new year bring? We do not yet know for sure, but we know that already this year, we have experienced something that has never before occurred in the United States. The news reports and photos from January 6, 2021, are fresh in our minds. Like many of you, I was taken aback by what happened at the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Congressmen, congresswomen and others have stated that they never imagined a scene like that in our nation's capitol. Perhaps you were taken aback, as well. It is a new year, but I hope, not a new year filled with the unrest and violence that we experienced in 2020. My prayers are for a new year filled with peace.

My sermon today, includes a reference to the new year and words from a comic strip entitled, *Mutts*, by Patrick McDonnell. While you will read more about this particular comic strip in my sermon, I would like to share yet another *Mutts* text with a relevant message. It appeared in the *La Crosse Tribune* on January 4, 2020. Here is the text--

Earl, the Jack Russell Terrier, says to his friend, Mooch, the tuxedo cat, "How Can we Make this Year **Better** than Last Year?" To which Mooch replies, "How can we **Not!?!"**

May we look to the new year with hope, and make it a better one by using our spiritual gifts for the Glory of God. May God fill this year with many examples of justice and peace throughout the world.

Peace,

Pr. Cathy

January 10, 2021 Sermon

Last Sunday (Jan, 5, 2021), as I was reading the *La Crosse Tribune*, I noticed the comic strip, Mutts, written by Patrick McDonnell. I have looked at it now and then over the years, but last Sunday its message resonated with me. In fact, I thought to myself: I can use this in a sermon.

I must admit that I don't ever remember using a comic strip in any of my sermons in the past. But, this is a new year, and one must be prepared to do things in new ways (as the comic strip suggests).

The story begins with Earl, a Jack Russell Terrier, saying to his friend, Mooch, the tuxedo cat, "**Happy New Year**, Mooch! To which Mooch responds, "A **New Year** is **not** enough. We need to ring in **New Eyes! New Ears! New Hands! New Feet! A New Mind! A New Backbone!** A New Soul." Earl replies, "**Wow**, this is going to be some year." To which Mooch responds, "**Ha!** What else is new?"

This is part of today's message as we begin a new year. We are invited to use all of our senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing in new ways! We are also invited to use our minds, bodies, and souls in new ways in this new year. We have prepared for 2021 as we have adjusted, readjusted, learned, and relearned how to live our lives during this time of the Coronavirus Pandemic. We have asked ourselves, "What will 2021 bring?" Or perhaps, "How might my life be changed in this new year?" While we do not yet know what lies ahead, we know that we will invest ourselves in the process--body, mind and spirit.

Our gospel lesson for today is taken from Mark. Jesus' baptism is described in the following synoptic Bible passages: Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22 (and it is implied by the similar wording to the synoptic gospels in John 1:24-34). Unlike the parallel version in the gospel of Matthew, Mark's story includes John the Baptist in the wilderness (1:4-6), John's preaching (1:7-8), and the story of Jesus' baptism (1:9-11). We recall these elements--Jesus came from Galilee, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and scripture tells us, "...just as he [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Per Melinda

Quivik, "He [Jesus] is infused with the Spirit from God. A new reality has come into the world, transforming all things including the seen (the heavens and a dove) and the unseen (a voice)."

Martin Luther described the **touch** of Jesus Christ's flesh on the water during his baptism, as hallowing all waters. Luther states, "Christ by the touch of his most innocent flesh has hallowed all waters, yes even all creation, through baptism..."

Jesus **saw** the "heavens torn apart." Jesus **heard** the voice of God the Father proclaiming him as Son. The Holy Spirit descended "like a dove on him." Jesus' experience that day involved his senses, it involved him--body, mind and spirit.

When we **hear** that Jesus saw the "heavens torn apart," we may be reminded of the temple curtain being "torn apart" as Jesus (on the cross) took his last breath (Mark 15:38). Through the Biblical account in Mark, we **hear** Jesus' identity expressed by the Centurian when he says, "Truly this man was God's Son (Mark 15:39). We recognize the similarities, one occurring at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry and one at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry: the proclaiming of Jesus at his baptism, and the proclaiming of Jesus upon his death. Per Paul Berge, "The gospel of Mark is dramatically framed by these two events of the in breaking of the kingdom and Word of God present in Jesus Christ."

Baptisms after Jesus' death were connected with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Lutherans, baptism requires water and the Trinitarian formula--in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The involvement of all members of the one, Triune God, are evident at Jesus' baptism.

Mark's story about Jesus' baptism does not say how, or if others that day were affected by what happened, because Mark's focus is on Jesus. We do not know from Mark's account if others who were there that day saw and experienced what Jesus saw and experienced. John's baptisms, as he proclaimed, were baptisms of repentance. But, Jesus, who was without sin, had no need of repentance or forgiveness.

In our baptism, we who are sinful people, renounce evil through our profession (or our parents' profession). We experience many of the elements that Jesus experienced at his baptism, albeit in different ways. Our senses are engaged during our baptism. Like Jesus, we experience the **touch** of the cleansing water, we **hear** God's word, we **see** the

water poured out for us, and we **receive the Holy Spirit**, who enters our hearts as we become Children of God. Later, when we are able to take communion, we **smell** the bread and wine, and we **taste** the presence of Christ in them.

One might say that through this experience, through our baptism, we gain **new eyes, new ears, new hands, new feet, new minds, a new backbone, and perhaps, a new soul!** For in knowing the one, Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, **all things in our lives are made new**. Through our baptism, our sins are washed away, though we are to **daily die to sin and rise to new life in Christ**. For Jesus' death on the cross, his glorious resurrection, and God's grace lead us to **new lives in Christ**. **The old has passed away; the new has begun!**

These past few days, I have been looking out on the trees covered with frost. They are the same trees that not too long ago I was enjoying because of the beautiful green leaves. But now, the colors are brown and white; the brown of the tree trunks and the white of the snow/frost on the branches. There is great beauty in this scene. Yesterday, a cardinal came and rested on a branch. In the midst of all the brown and white, there was red. And with its introduction, the tree seemed **alive** with color. The contrast between the brown, white and red, was striking. The tree at rest, now appeared vibrant and alive.

How striking it must have been on that day at Jesus' baptism, when the heavens were torn apart, and the dove descended on him. In the stillness, in the quiet of that day, life changed and became new for all who believe in Jesus Christ, and all who will come to believe in him.

In this **new year**, may we experience **new eyes to see** God's world in new ways, **new ears to hear** God's word in fresh and new ways, **new hands** and **new feet** for service to God, **new minds** that are open to learning about God and all that God has created, a **new backbone** to use our spiritual gifts for God's glory, and perhaps, a **new soul**, as we listen to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit leading us and guiding us in new ways in this new year. Amen.