

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

Alice M.C. Ling, Senior Pastor

First Sunday in Christmastide

31 December 2006

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:41-52

Today may only be the 7th day of Christmas, but it is the last and final day of 2006. I remember talking with a family last Sunday who said, we just need this year to be over. There's been too much struggle, pain and loss. Let's put it to bed and start over again! 2007 has got to be a better year for us. I don't know whether you can relate to that or not. Maybe you're feeling upbeat, hopeful and excited about all of the potential of the new year. A whole new year to create and inhabit, a whole blank screen to fill, a whole lot of open potential and promise to explore and discover. We are ready and waiting – bring it on!

Standing here on the brink, I want us to take some time and think carefully about how we enter the new year that awaits us. We can let it happen to us. We can keep hold of all the baggage we've accumulated over the course of this year and drag it with us into the next one. And the one after that. And the one after that. We can throw it all off, hit the delete button at the stroke of midnight and walk into 2007 as free and unencumbered as a butterfly just stretching its wings from the freedom of the cocoon. We can draft the perennial list of good intentions and hopeful resolutions and stand back to watch and see how many we even remember in the morning – much less on the 15th of the month. We can take the bull by the horns and force the year into compliance with our will and our wishes (good luck with that one). We can pause here at the threshold and look ahead with prayer and reflection, asking God to go with us into this new land, walking beside us as companion and compass, so that we might walk in faithfulness and hopeful confidence.

I've been vaguely aware for years of a tradition called Watch Night, which is the practice of gathering together for worship at the end of December 31. I've never attended, much less planned and led one of those services, nor is that a part of our tradition. Who knows if that's because we're so intent on partying, or because one midnight service a year is enough – and we certainly don't need them two weeks in a row! If we're going to be up past midnight, let's at least be hooping it up when the ball drops. And then hightailing it for bed, just as fast as we can get there.

As I did some reading this week about Watch Night, I learned a couple of interesting things, one of which seemed logical and made sense; one that amazed me. The tradition of gathering for worship on New Year's Eve is actually a Methodist tradition, as John Wesley encouraged his followers to covenant and rededicate themselves to God. What better time to commit and covenant than at the beginning of a new year. And so, many congregations gather anytime between 7 and 11, to sing and celebrate, pray and promise that the new year will be one offered to God and lived in a covenant of faithfulness. In fact, I noticed that the sign in front of St.

Luke's announced a service tonight at 11 pm – so if anyone is looking for a group to gather with, that would be the place.

I also discovered this week a very different tradition, and that's one grounded in African American churches and that reaches back to December 31, 1862. Imagine if you can, African-Americans gathered that night in homes and churches all across this country, anxiously awaiting the news that the Emancipation Proclamation had actually become law. When the clock struck midnight signaling the start of the new year, all slaves in the Confederate States were declared legally free. As the news was received, prayers, shouts and songs of joy rose up as people fell to their knees and thanked God for this great and glorious new day. I'd like to share a poem with you that speaks to some of the wonder of that incredible day.

Watch Night

i.

We gather
with quiet invocations and fervent shouts
in prayer houses built by our ancestors.
It is the anniversary of freedom's eve,
the beginning of a new year;
and our voices ache with jubilee songs
our feet moving, our bodies possessed
our spirits remembering.
It was on this new year's day long ago that enslaved Africans,
their children,
and their children's children
became irrevocably free.

*On the 1st day
of January, A.D. 1863,
all persons held as slaves
within any State
or designated part of a State
the people whereof
shall then be in rebellion...*

The freedom words
that were woven into sweet-grass baskets,
hidden in the words of negro spirituals,
preached aloud at campground meetings,
sung to black babies in sleepy-time songs,
would become the law of the land.

*Alleluia.
Praise the Lord.*

ii.

Then freedom's eve became freedom's day
(after 100 days of waiting,
three years of a bloody civil war,

more than two centuries of servitude)
as an answer to the petitioners plea:
How long, my Lord, how long
Truly there was a reason why
so many were gathered
on that new year's eve in 1862:
skins dark as the midnight sky,
or pale as the sand on a sea island beach.
Truly there was a reason why,
embraced by the traditions from across the seas,
our ancestors had the griots
tell those wonderful stories of home.
Truly there was a reason why,
they created drum sounds with their feet,
their hand-claps, and their rhythm sticks;
spoke of a future free of shackles,
waited and watched till the morning came.
They trusted the words of Lincoln:
*Shall be then, thenceforward,
and forever free.*
They believed the words of Leviticus:
It shall be a Jubilee for you
*and each of you shall return to his possession,
and each of you return to his family.*
But could they really have faith
(this time)
that the righteous would truly be blessed?
for the comings and goings of life
can never be foretold.
How long, my Lord, how long?

iii.

There was no word at midnight,
nor at daybreak,
but past dusk on new year's day came a message:
tapped across telegraph wires,
spoken at great mass meetings,
the proclamation had been signed,
emancipation was forever.
God's chosen would be free.
It was written:
*... upon this act,
sincerely believed to be an act of justice
warranted by the Constitution
upon military necessity
I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind
and the gracious favor of Almighty God.*

iv.

Now, more than a century later,
in churches and chapels and houses of prayer,
on the anniversary of freedom's eve
on watch night:
we gather
to welcome yet another year;
to bring in the jubilee.
Waiting anew for the midnight hour
with whispers and shouts,
singing and silence,
libations and thanksgiving.
Remembering that we were not always
free.

Charyn D. Sutton,

(from "Behold, a New Thing! A Watch Night Service Celebration", *Worship Ways*, United Church of Christ, © 2002)

And so, here we are, on the threshold when one year yields to another. I don't know how you will spend the midnight hour, but I do want us to pause now with a little more than thirteen hours to go and reflect on what awaits us. Few of us will ever know the wonder of such a profound gift as a proclamation declaring us free in such bold and radical terms. But we do receive lesser versions of that gift every day, as our slate is wiped clean, our past is washed away and we are set free to begin again. We don't need to carry the accumulated baggage of our year with us into the new year, or the one after that, or the one after that. Yes, there are a lot of things we can't change, but there are also a lot of stains and regrets and grudges and grievances that we simply don't need to take with us. We are free in the heart and eyes of God, and now is a perfect time to lay our burdens down, so that we might dance our way into the future that awaits us.

And it is precisely in the presence of this gift of grace and freedom that is it also good and right to rededicate ourselves to live lives of faithfulness in the year that is to come. To enter 2007 having made a covenant with God, a pact if you will, about our intentions and our hopes and our commitments and our resolve to be God's people in the year that awaits us. I was struck by the lesson from Colossians because of its call that we dress ourselves as God's chosen ones: with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. That we bear with one another, that we forgive each other, that we clothe ourselves in love, with the peace of Christ as the chart and compass by which our lives are governed. And then the text goes on to address our life together as a congregation. As one commentator writes,

We are to teach and admonish each other and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Jesus did not come to give a ticket to heaven to a host of rugged individuals. He came to create a body who in peace and love would reveal the truth of God to the world and live as his representative people... We are called to love God and our neighbor, and that implies real acts. (page 394, Leonard R. Klein)

...as individuals and as a congregation.

We've just spent a season immersed in words and visions of peace and justice, of promise and hope, the song of angels bringing God's good will to all humanity. Let us clothe ourselves in those words and promises and visions and realities. My friends, let us go forward into this new year clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and forgiveness, wrapped in the presence and love of God, bearing God's love into the world, with the peace of Christ as the chart and compass by which our lives are governed. Let us be a body of believers who in peace and love would reveal the truth of God to the world and live as God's representative people.

Happy New Year, my friends. And Merry Christmas all year long. Amen.