**NEW AND IMPROVED, NEH. 6:1-4, ACTS 5:12-32, JAN. 8/23.**

 Last week we reflected on “**Newness**” as we gathered together for the 1st time in the New Year. Ecclesiastes 3 always gives us pause to ponder how we’ve used our time. “There’s a time for everything & a season for every activity under heaven.” Have we been growing toward God over the past year or drifting away from Him? Have we been using the gift of each day wisely, or wasting the time away—always good questions to consider. And as I mentioned last week, it’s never too late to start doing what is right. Since we celebrated Communion, it was also timely to consider **the New Covenant** that Jesus brought us through His blood shed for us—a new covenant of grace & forgiveness for our sins, if we confess them & confess Christ as Lord.

 **We also spoke about new things happening in our lives**. Are the best days behind us or ahead of us? When most of our conversations focus on what’s in our past, we’ve got a problem. Now I’m not talking about the natural kinds of things as you recount how your time at Christmas was or over some magnificent memory. I’m saying if there’s more hope in your yesterdays than your tomorrows, that’s not how God wants you to focus. And I’m not saying this insensitively. Those who are well along in years know that your tomorrows may well include declining health, more aches and pains and medical tests and so on. I’m getting into that myself. As they say, aging ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. It’s not for the faint of heart.

**But God has given us** the elderly to share their wisdom. So you can listen back with joy and gratitude thinking of late conversations with Goodwin or Brian Leon. They could relate to you and often offer you invaluable advice from their experiences. If you were well acquainted with either of them, you know very well how much they looked forward to their time at church in worship. I’ve had a couple of friends who got downright out of sorts if they missed church! Do you look forward to our worship time together with that kind of passion?  **In spite of their advanced years, they looked forward with joy for a new thing** each Sunday.

 When I lead a funeral service **I always make a point of speaking about the great hope we have, hope like no other** in fact, because of the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ. **To-morrow always holds hope for the Christian**. Paul, in the 1st chapter of Philippians speaks about living or dying this way:

“For to me **to live is Christ and to die is gain**. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the 2: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body…” So, no matter what your plight, you can look forward to tomorrow.

 God says **at the end of Hebrews**: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever”. Though He is unchanging, forever the same in His nature and love and grace, it does not mean that we are to be unchanging. **Can you imagine if we didn’t change** from the time we were in-fants, or children, or teenagers! Or from the way we were when we had our 1st job or our 1st failure? **God intends for us to grow our entire lives**. Right up to the day when He calls us home to Himself, we are to grow more like Him. Songwriter, **Keith Green**, says that on the day we die may it be no great change. In other words we should grow more like Jesus, until, at death, we can move into His holy presence without too much shock or change because day by day we’ve been growing in His image, in His likeness.

 **So, here’s the thing**. As we enter this New Year, is it going to be more of the same ole’, **or are we open to & excited about what God is doing** in our personal lives & here in His church at MBC? **Because God is always doing a new thing**. **He’s always** moving hearts, **He’s always** drawing people to repentance, **He’s always** drawing people to Himself, **He’s always** working reconciliation through Jesus, **He’s always** prompting us by His Spirit.  **So why should we think we aren’t going to change or we shouldn’t change or we don’t want to change?** You’re not even the same now as you were when you woke up this morning. The world is a different place than it was yesterday. You certainly don’t want to resist the leading of the Holy Spirit, do you?

 It’s not done so much these days, but you may remember a time when **ads on TV** always referred to their product as “**new and improved**”. Do you recall it? Now it’s not as if someone is going to change a product to something new and tell you it’s new and worse or inferior! We got a notice from our bank telling us of great improvements they were making to our banking. The letter began by telling us that the branch now offered free Wi-Fi, then went on to say tellers would no longer be handling cash at the counter, including American funds. I couldn’t be-lieve it and showed it to Sharon & asked her, “**So where’s the good news in this?”** Advertising can hype anything up to sound good. The details may show something altogether different.

 It’s true, as **Solomon** repeatedly said in Ecclesiastes, there’s nothing new under the sun. **Still, God has given us the potential to make many remarkable new things**. But they come from what He has already provided. **So there are many new “things” we may be about**.

 We have those **great verses in Lamentations** by Jeremiah the prophet: “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: **Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morn-ing;** great is your faithfulness.”

 **God’s compassions are new every morning**! It’s important to remember that always! **In Ezekiel, God says that He will give us a new heart and a new spirit**—an undivided heart.

 Do you remember the **new commandment** that Jesus Himself gave to us? Yes, that’s right. “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” **So here’s something new for you.** If you aren’t loving everyone—did Jesus say everyone?—yes, He did. If you aren’t loving everyone the way Jesus has loved you, **you can start this New Year** by doing that.

 **Nehemiah** gives a powerful reminder for us all. Cyrus, the king of Persia—Persia had overthrown the Babylonians who brought the Jews into captivity—enables the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall & Nehemiah is the man leading that project under constant opposition. Sanballat & Tobiah are the 2 main guys taunting Nehemiah & the rest of the Jews because they know if the wall’s built it’ll be impossible to dominate the Jews. So they try to goad Nehemiah to come down & “meet” with them to talk. But Nehemiah’s on to them. They were scheming to harm him. 4 times they tried the same ploy. But Nehemiah in effect says, “**Tell them I can’t come down; I’m doing a great thing, I’m doing a new thing.” God calls us to do new things, great things, even when, maybe especially when, the opposition is very strong or overwhelming.**

 **Luke lays it out big** in Acts 5 in 1 sentence. Soon after Jesus ascended, the apostles went throughout Jerusalem healing “all” who were sick and tormented by evil spirits. The high priest and Sadduceeswere filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in jail. Here it is: “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ‘Go, stand in the temple courts and **tell the people the full message of this new life**.’”

Beloved, it’s not just a New Year, not just a new day, not just a new flavour of the month —it’s an entire new life that we are to live—1 blessed day at a time! Take it to the streets! **God wants to do a new & improved life with you!** That’s what’s new. We’ll unwrap that next week.