

"NEW WINE; FRESH WINESKINS"  
December 29, 1991

TEXT: Luke 5:38 "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins;"

Now that Christmas is over, most of us are looking forward to the new year. Some, no doubt, have parties planned for New Year's Eve. Others, like myself, may be planning to stay home, celebrate a bit with the family, and get a good night's sleep. There was a time when I thought that was a terrible way to spend New Year's Eve, but the older I get the better it seems to me. And, besides, that way I will be in good shape to enjoy the parades and the football games on New Year's Day.

Perhaps some of you are making New Year's Resolutions, in spite of the fact that past resolutions may not have lasted very long. For me, at least, there seems to be something about the new year --and my own birthday, which is a sort of new year for me-- that hold out the possibility of starting anew. Yet, I know only too well how hard real change can be and how often New Year's Resolutions are broken almost before we even know it.

The Psalmist wrote, "Give thanks to the Lord . . . sing to Him a new song." (Psalm 33:2), but most of us keep on singing the same old songs. We keep going down the same old paths and, as a result, too often wind up in the same old places. In the language of the Bible, our "hardness of heart" closes off the possibility of stretching our souls, enlarging our vision, and changing our ways.

We are like those old wineskins of which Jesus spoke in this morning's Unison Reading. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins." (Luke 5:37-38)

Old wineskins can not be used for new wine because age has made them brittle and inflexible. And, as the new wine continues to ferment, it give off gasses which expand and burst the old skins. In the same way, it is very hard for us to make little changes here and there but still maintain our old attitudes and our old priorities.

We may think we are changing because no two years are ever exactly alike. Fashions come and go. New people come into our lives and old acquaintances leave them. We may make a job change or a change of residence, but Irma Peter, who is, I believe, the wife of the man who gave us the "Peter Principle", has wisely observed that, "Just because everything is different does not

mean that anything has changed." Very often, the more things change, the more they really stay the same.

Packer Packers will understand that. Since the glory days when Vince Lombardi coached the Packers to one world championship after another, there have been new general managers, new coaches, and new players. But, in spite of hopeful signs here and there, nothing much really changed, and year after year the Packers have finished out of the playoffs, leaving only that same forlorn hope, "Wait till next year!"

Unfortunately, for many people, life can be like that. Many never really have a new year. They are like the man of whom it was said, "He doesn't have twenty years of experience. He has only one which he's repeated twenty times." Like the Packers in recent years, they may make changes here and there, but their lives are never new in any really significant way.

One reason for this may be that many people really do not want to change. Some are happy with their lives the way they are. And they do not trust Jesus' promise that he came to give us life and life more abundantly. They like things just the way they are. And, even if present circumstances are less than pleasant, they may be afraid to change them. The past, however, difficult, nevertheless has the great advantage of being familiar. We may not like it much, but at least we know how to deal with it.

We know we can cope. And we wonder, if things should change, really change, would we be able to handle the changes? We are not sure. And so we go through life repeating familiar patterns of behavior and experience instead of taking a risk on anything really new. As John Steinbeck observed, "It is the nature of a man as he grows older . . . to protest against change, particularly change for the better." How new will 1992 be? How new do you really want it to be?

But not all failure to change can be blamed on lack of interest. Some people want to change, but they do not know how to go about it. As a result, they usually try to change piecemeal --a little bit here, a little bit there. But that is exactly the kind of futile approach which Jesus said can not be effective.

He said, "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment, if he does he will tear the new and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled and the skins destroyed."

If we are not to keep on living old patterns and making the same old mistakes, we have to do more than change a little bit here and there. Ezekiel 18:31 challenges us to "Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me and get yourself a new heart and a new spirit."

Unfortunately, that is easier said than done. Our broken New Year's Resolutions remind us of that. Our intentions may be good, but we all know where the road that is paved with good intentions leads. The question is "How can we live up to our intentions? How can we make changes in our lives so the future can be really new?"

In the thirty-sixth chapter of Ezekiel, God says, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." (Ezekiel 36:26-27) If 1992 is to be new in any meaningful kind of way --either for us or for this church-- then we must turn to God in open and whole-hearted submission. I realize, of course, that many people do not want to do that. They do not want to submit. They want to control. But, if we insist on doing things on our own, chances are that 1992 will not be very different from 1991.

It will be different only if we let God make us different. But remember, if we turn to God, we can not hold anything back. It is not like going into a tailor's shop to have a few alterations made. The sleeve a little longer, the shoulder a little higher. It is more like going to a highly creative couturier and saying, "Do me!" Or like hiring an interior decorator and saying, "Do whatever needs doing."

We can not say to God, "Do only this couch and that chair." We can not even say, "Do everything except that couch and that chair." If we want God to put a new heart within us --and that is the only way real change is likely to take place-- we have to say, "I trust you, Lord. Do whatever needs doing."

That is what St. Paul did. So he was able to say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) We can do that, too --if we dare.

1992 can be a new year. New for us and new for this church. Or it can be little more than an instant replay of last year, and of the year before, and of the year before that. It all depends on us. On what we really want. And on how much we are willing to trust God with our lives and the life of this church.

It may very well not happen all at once, like Dave Wakefield's heart transplant a few days ago. More often than not, it is like getting a sun tan. As we expose ourselves to God day by day, something almost imperceptible happens. But it does happen. And, if we spend time every day --I emphasize every day-- in reading the Bible, in prayerful openness to God and to God's will for us, then 1992 can be a very "Happy New Year" indeed. Happy New Year!