

“Keep the Change”

© 2009 Rev. James L. Perry, Jr.
East Cobb United Methodist Church
January 4, 2009

Scripture: Luke 3:21-22; Isaiah 40:28-31

Happy New Year! Welcome to 2009 at East Cobb United Methodist Church! This will be a great year – especially if we measure it by God’s standards and not ours. This will be a great year personally and professionally for you, and it will be a great year for the church. How can I be so sure? Things do not seem so rocky when you belong to the Rock. That means some of us have to change, and others will have to keep the positive changes we have experienced and build upon them. Let me explain.

A couple of hunters hired an Alaskan bush pilot to drop them into a remote location, then return in seven days to pick them up. At the appointed time, the pilot arrived and loaded the hunters and their gear in the plane and prepared to take off. "Wait a minute," said the first hunter. "What about our moose?" "Sorry," said the pilot. "We're at maximum weight already." "But our pilot last year loaded our moose, and he had the same size plane as this one." "Really?" asked the pilot, not wanting to be outdone. "Well, I guess we could give it a try." With that, he strapped the moose carcass to the pontoons. They sputtered to the end of the lake to get the longest possible takeoff. He shoved the throttle forward; they began to move; and finally, they lifted off the lake, just clearing the trees. But the pilot was right. They were seriously overloaded, and crashed just moments into the flight. Both hunters were knocked unconscious, but came to at about the same time. The first hunter looked around at the mess. "Where are we?" he asked his partner. "About 50 yards from where we crashed last year."

Doing things the way we have always done them insures that we will continue to get the results we have always gotten. In fact, doing things the way we have always done them and expecting a different result is one of the definitions of *insanity*. Before you take offense at that, think about it. Successful people are willing to change when presented with a better alternative. People who cannot or will not change miss the best life has to offer.

How many of you have written a check or other dated document and put “2008” rather than “2009” on it already this year. It takes a while to get the brain reprogrammed to write the correct year. It takes us a while to adjust to any change in our lives, but change is inevitable and necessary. If you doubt that, go back and look at pictures of yourself from 10 or more years ago. Life equals change, so when we resist change, we are using God-given energy for other than God-given purposes. Simply put, we change or we die.

Sometimes we make changes intentionally, as we do today in launching our new Sunday morning schedule. A lot changed starting today, so give careful attention to your bulletin and the posters up around the church. The changes we make today are changes we decided to make together, with God’s help, so we can be more effective in using the resources God has given us. Other changes are very personal and require a personal commitment and determination to make that change a part of who we are going forward. You may call those changes New Year’s Resolutions, but the reality is that we are not very good about keeping them. Writer Ed McManus has some words of comfort for those of us who are making resolutions: “Don’t worry about keeping those 2009 New Year’s resolutions,” he says. “You only have to deal with them until February, and then you can give them up for Lent.” It sounds like he has been spying on some of us.

Jesus Christ, whose birth we have just celebrated, came to give us the gift of change. His message was not one of comfort to the establishment and to the old order. He came with a message of repentance. Repent means to turn away and go a different way, so repentance requires change. Turning away from one thing requires turning toward something else. It is good to make changes. As many are quick to remind us, none of us is perfect. In fact, some of us might have some deep regrets about the way we have lived our lives. But the emphasis today is not just on our past and the things we could have done differently. It is also on our future which today is a blank slate awaiting our 2009 decisions.

Change can result from many circumstances, but let's look at just three: Reaction, Response, and Resolve. You are driving on I-75, and someone cuts you off to change lanes. You must react to avoid a collision. Something you were doing had to change to avoid disaster. Not only did you immediately change your behavior, but your temperament as well. You instantly became upset with that other driver and perhaps honked at them long and loud. Reacting is by definition an unplanned response to something happening to you that you probably did not foresee. The world gives us situations every day to which we react. How we react depends directly on our relationship with God and the message of hope and repentance that Jesus brought. Anger and the honking horn is the world's answer. We can do better than that. For example, how often do we pray for the one who has just done something to upset us? How much difference could it make if we cared enough to do so?

Change can come as a response. Many of you are experiencing a change because you agreed to serve in church leadership for the first time in 2009. The Committee on Lay Leadership asked you to serve, and you responded. The result was a change. All of us are invited to participate fully in the promise of God on our lives. Some of us have said 'yes' to God, and others are just playing church or milling around on the fringes of the church experience waiting to see what this church and its people become. I have news:

- The church will become what you decide to make it, with God's help.
- The church will never be stronger than its most vocal critic.
- The church will never be more effective than its weakest Ministry Team or Committee member or its most ineffective Staff member.
- The church will never reach the unbelievers around us until we behave a lot less like the world and a bit more like the Savior who came to show us how.

This is not the most important sermon of the week. In fact, it is not important at all. The only sermon of any consequence in your world this week is the message you convey about God to others through the life you live. God's plan for reconciliation was to engage a broken world by taking on human flesh. His plan has not changed, just the flesh. It was Jesus, and now it is you and me. (2 Corinthians 5). Bear the name of Jesus well to a watching world.

Change can result from resolve or commitment to do or be different in the future. That level of determination is unshakable and really gets attention when we have it. We were at Stone Mountain shortly after Christmas. I was amazed to see the pines growing out of the cracks in the Big Rock. These trees were growing in an unlikely place. They were not supposed to survive in the extreme heat of the rock's surface in summer. They certainly did not get enough nutrients and water to survive given our water shortages and the winds that blow across the surface of the mountain. Yet, there they stood in the face of every adversity. I wondered how many of us have the courage to place ourselves in the midst of such adversity and hold on for the glory of God. How many of us would be willing to hold fast, even in difficult circumstances, just to bring life and hope to an

otherwise desolate world. People have to decide to do things like that, and that decision brings change.

In our scripture today, Jesus has come to John the Baptist to be baptized. Why? Jesus certainly did not need repentance or baptism. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace – a fancy way of saying that, when you have found the saving love of God through Christ, you want to do something to let others know about it. John recognized the obvious and did not want to baptize Jesus. He had a very human response to a divine moment. Yet he responded anyway. He baptized Jesus as an example for us, reminding us that our faith relationship with God cannot be a secret if it is real. Then something rather remarkable happened. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” The obedience of John brought about a revelation of God to the people. And because Jesus was baptized, we still baptize those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – not because the water does anything special, but because the water reminds us that we have been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The real baptism that day was not the water baptism. It was the baptism of the Holy Spirit that is available today to all who believe. When the Holy Spirit has come to you and you have received the Spirit, you are changed.

At the beginning today, I said this would be a great year for all of you and for the church. For that to happen, we have to be God’s people every day. We have to repent of our sinful ways and joyfully seek the will of God for ourselves and the life of God’s church. It means relying fully on God in all circumstances. Many of you have unusually heavy burdens caused by past sinfulness, regrets, health issues with you and/or your family, financial problems, anxiety, or questions about your self worth when a company says they are going to have to let you go. Isaiah 40:31 says, “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.” The word “wait” here means giving over everything to God; believing that he is able to sustain us in every circumstance. Wait upon the Lord in every circumstance and he will be your Rock. When the world is crumbling around you, the Rock of your salvation will sustain you. (II Samuel 22:2; Psalms 18:2; 31:3; 71:3). If you build your life upon the Rock, the shifting sands of the world will not destroy you. (Matthew 7:25). The Rock of Ages will be the same a year from now; and if we are faithful, we will become steadfast, taking on the character of the Rock (God) and on these rocks, he will build the Church. If we faithfully follow that call as Peter did, Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. What greater promise do we need?

If you have been changed by responding to God’s invitation to send the Holy Spirit into your life, you know what I am talking about. If anything I have said sounds a bit different from your personal experience, I hope you have heard an invitation to change. If you just do not believe God can make that kind of difference in the lives of people, then come and talk with us about it. Don’t let your initial reaction keep you from an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ.

This morning as we start a new year together, we are celebrating both of the Sacraments recognized in the United Methodist Church – Baptism and Holy Communion – as both were instituted by Jesus as recorded in Scripture. In just a moment, you will be assisted by our ushers to come forward and receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is a remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice for us on the cross and a celebration of the assurance that believing in Jesus assures victory – even victory over death. You do not have to be a member of this or any church to receive Holy Communion. This is the Lord’s

Table, not ours. All we ask is that you are seeking to live a life that honors God, and you are welcome here as His guest.

Then you will have the opportunity to renew your baptismal covenant. If you have not been baptized, take one of these cards as you come forward this morning. If you wish to be baptized, give it to one of the pastors, and we will discuss this decision with you. If you have been baptized, this reaffirms that you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and demonstrates your resolve to live a life before others that exemplifies the gospel. In preparation for this renewal of vows, I ask each of you:

- Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? I Do.
- Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? I Do.
- Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? I Do.
- According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? I Will.

After you have received Holy Communion, come to the stations where one of the pastors will be standing. There is a bowl at each station containing rocks submerged in water. Reach in and pick one of the smooth rocks and take it with you. Let the water remind you of the Living Water of Jesus and the water used at your baptism. Let it remind you of the commitment you once made to change, and God's continuous presence to help you keep that change alive in your life.

The stones remind us of the promises of God to never leave or forsake us. They remind us that the rough edges of life can be handled with the power of God at work in our lives. The rough places will be made plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed – through YOU! Remember your baptism and be thankful. Then give God the glory, because the best *is* yet to come!

Prayer
Sacrament of Holy Communion
And Renewal of Baptism

Response:

Leader: I dedicate this year to you, Lord, with a promise to improve in spirit, mind, and body,

People: The run-down property that bears my name. This year I'll try to keep the house where I reside,

Leader: As you would have me keep it: structure firm, chambers clean, windows shining,

People: From inside with such a light that passersby will stop to ask, "Who lives here?" or

Leader: "Who owns this lovely place?"

People: And I shall tell them with a humble nod,

All: "I'm just a tenant here. The Owner is the one who deserves your praise."