

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Epiphany

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Text: Matthew 26:26-30/Revelation 21:1-6a

Title: “Bread, Bath and Beyond: Bread”

The New Year always presents the opportunity to begin again, doesn't it? Every New Year offers up the invitation to reflect on the year behind and set our eyes on the year ahead. Sometimes I've set goals sometimes I haven't. Sometimes I've kept on pace with my goals. Sometimes I haven't. But whether I set goals or not, I find—along with many others—that reflecting on the year can be a helpful practice and projecting into the year ahead can launch me into new and better habits as I continue my journey through life so generously given by God.

As we step into this new year together as a congregation, we begin a new worship series called “Bread, Bath and Beyond” because when you want to spruce up the place in which you live—your home—one of the popular places to shop is the franchise store, Bed, Bath and Beyond. It provides products to spruce up our homes and plenty of them. The theme for this series is an invitation to spruce up our spiritual lives as we enter a new year.

As we do so, we are all in that place of between the past and the not yet, between what has already taken place and the promises of what is yet to take place. A new year holds the promise of new changes for us as we live into the journey God has given us to travel. What might be made new in us as we live into 2015?

Jesus spoke of this place of being between the past and the not yet when in the Gospels he speaks about the kingdom of God. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry “...proclaiming the good news^[a] of God,^[b] 15 and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;’^[c] repent, and believe in the good news.”^[d]
(Mark 1:14-15).

Later in that same Gospel account, a person with religious authority asked him “Which commandment is the first of all?” And Jesus answered,

“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”³² Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’;³³ and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one's neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and

sacrifices.”

When the man confirmed Jesus’ answer to his question, Jesus told him “...You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12)

As the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities grew in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus began to teach his disciples that he would die as a result of those conflicts and rise three days later. Peter wasn’t ready to hear this and scolded Jesus for saying such a thing. Jesus, in turn, scolded Peter and then said to the crowd:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, ^[i] will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words ^[ii] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

9 ¹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with ^[a]power.”

(Mark 8:34-9:1)

In the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus was once asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus responded to them by saying:

“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among ^[b] you.” (Luke 17:20-22)

From Matthew’s Gospel account, Jesus spends his last night between the past and the not yet in an upper room eating his final meal as we heard a few moments ago. He blessed and broke bread, blessed and shared the cup and told the room full of friends,

“29 I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

The Kingdom of God is among you, witnessed by those among Jesus’ circle and yet at the same time, it is near or not far--not yet. It’s as if the kingdom of God is present in every moment and yet not quite fully present at the same time. And yet, in communion, Jesus drinks it new with his disciples in his Father’s kingdom even beyond his death which is why communion is central to our faith, our trust in God’s eternal presence, God’s kingdom presence. When we eat of communion bread and drink communion juice we’re eating and drinking with Jesus and one another. It’s as if we are with Jesus in the in- between time of what has already happened and the not yet. It’s a kingdom moment.

In thinking about all of this, I read of the experience of a Christian from Britain. Brian Greet tells of something he saw when traveling in India that helped him understand better the idea of the true church. He was visiting a Christian community where people were suffering from leprosy.

When it came time for lunch, he headed for the central dining room. On the way, he heard the sound of laughter behind him. Turning around, he saw two young men, one riding on the other's back. Pretending to be horse and rider, they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Then Greet noticed that the man who was carrying his friend was blind, and the man he was carrying was lame. The man without eyes used his feet; the man without feet used his eyes. Together they found their food and shared it.

That's the idea of God's Kingdom living among us because the church isn't solitary Christians in our own cubicles; it's a fellowship of followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus modelled that for us. Communion, the common meal of the church, reminds us of the importance to our own spiritual experience of the community's experience of faith. We get spiritual sustenance in the company of others.

Writer Nancy Mairs tells about what communion came to mean to her when she came to her present church during a serious illness without having experienced conversion:

The model I experienced [at that church] was one of inclusion rather than exclusion. Instead of being denied communion unless I converted, I was given communion until I felt strong enough to convert. The nourishing quality of the eucharist, freely offered to anyone who's famished, has always been a central metaphor for me. I don't partake because I'm a good [Christian], holy and pious and sleek. I partake because I am a bad [Christian] riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger: fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul. I need food.

Mairs talks about the nourishing quality of receiving communion as part of a community. "I was given communion until I felt strong enough to convert."

Where will you find nourishment for your soul in 2015? What might be made new in you by the God who makes all things new? Personal time with God through the reading of scripture, private prayer, and devotions does provide spiritual nourishment, and people often make New Year's resolutions about being better with spending alone time with God. And that's something to consider if that is not your current practice. Consider picking up an Upper Room devotional guide at the Welcome Center and begin a new practice of daily time with God using it as a guide.

But the Christian faith is not an individual preoccupation. It has always been from the very beginning a communal experience of God. Jesus modeled it as he sat at the table with his friends on his last night eating his last meal.

It's fitting, then, that we begin this new year sharing the bread and the cup as a community of people who trust in the presence of God in this meal because not only do we need God in order to be fed spiritually, but we also need one another.