

NEW  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 65:17-25

Thus says the Lord: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” With all due respect to the Lord, that announcement is not exactly, well, new. If there is a word that gets overused in our world, it is this word *new*. There are new cereals in the grocery store, new automobiles on the showroom floor, new techno-gadgets for us to adore.

We can imagine Microsoft’s Bill Gates taking these words of Isaiah, and making a commercial out of them:

Behold I am about to create a new computer.  
The former laptops will not be remembered  
and old I-pods will not be called to mind.  
But the new computer I create will cause delight and rejoicing.

The small nation of Bhutan is said to have some of the happiest citizens of any nation on earth. Its location in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains makes it hard to get to, so the people have treasured their traditions for many generations. Just seven years ago, the king of Bhutan first permitted the people to have television and access to the Internet. And now the young people of the nation want to leave the old for the new. They want to take off the traditional garb and put on blue jeans and go out dancing. And so this small nation now has access to the latest thing, to that which is new. But it is also said that the happiness quotient in Bhutan is not quite as high as it formerly was.<sup>1</sup>

And yet you and I are here, in this sanctuary, because we hope that maybe today we will hear something new, genuinely new, something that will lift our tired spirits, something

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<sup>1</sup> Heard on National Public Radio, November 14, 2007.

that will point us in a new direction in our lives, something that will give us a new perspective on the crazy world we live in. We hunger for that which is truly new.

So hear the word of the Lord: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” In our old world, can such a new word really be true? Can it be that it would bring what it promises—delight and joy? Can we see it?

What is promised here is nothing short of wonderful. What new thing is God bringing?

Here is what is promised—long life: “One who lives a hundred years will be considered a youth.”

Here is what is promised—protection for children: “No more shall there be an infant that lives only a few days.”

Here is what is promised—stability and peace: “No more shall one plant and another eat . . . they shall long enjoy the work of their hands. . . They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity.”

Here is what is promised—peace in the natural world: “The wolf and the lamb will feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

The prophet who wrote these words was no Pollyanna, sitting in a Lazyboy recliner writing these nice things. The prophet knew well the sort of world he lived in. There were plenty of children who lived only a few days after birth. There were frequent invasions by marauding armies that occupied the house you had built, that enjoyed the harvest you had planted. It is just in that world, a world of hurt and pain and death, that the prophet dares to look out toward a vision of that which is new and joyous.

We might dismiss it all as an impossibly far-off vision. We still have children who live but a few days. We still have wars and rumors of war. But, friends, we have another who has spoken similar words. “Behold, I make all things new.” Those are the words of Jesus Christ our Lord. And Jesus is alive. What is the resurrection, after all, but the breaking into our world of that which is completely and utterly new—the newness of life.

That is why we worship on the first day of the week: Jesus rose on the first day of the week. Each Sunday is really an Easter Sunday. Each Sunday we gather to remember that

the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed. In our world of death and hurt and tears, we dare to affirm a risen Lord who is bringing into our world that which is new.

We have signs here in the sanctuary of the new thing which Christ is doing. One is our baptismal font. Have you noticed that it has eight sides? That is not by accident. God created the world in seven days. And now we have an eighth day, the day of resurrection, the first day of the new creation. When a person is presented for baptism, that one is immersed in the new life of Christ.

Another sign is our bulletin today, the Assurance of Pardon. “We used to regard people from a human point of view.” You know—this person is rich and that one is poor, this one is cool and attractive, that one is ugly and repulsive, this one, that one . . . We used to regard people in that way, putting them into categories and pigeonholes. “But we regard them that way no longer. For anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.” We actually take a few liberties with what Paul says. What he writes is: “Anyone who is in Christ—new creation! The past is finished and gone. Everything is fresh and new.” Just here, in the midst of our old world, we dare to affirm that which is new.

As I have pondered these words this week, I have been thinking about a responsibility I have been given with our presbytery. I am on an administrative commission to consider the future of the Frankewing Presbyterian Church down in Giles County. The Frankewing community is a wide place in the road off Highway 64. The church was built in 1926, mostly by the labor of those who were its members. For a couple of generations the church flourished, with Sunday school for children and worship for all on Sunday mornings. But then folks started to move away to other places and other churches. Now the church lists just three or four members, and there hasn't been a worship service in the building in two or three years. Nothing new there.

So the presbytery formed this administrative commission—seven of us, elders and ministers—to consider the future of that church and make decisions on what to do. A few weeks ago the commission met at the church, to see what sort of shape it was in. What we found was a building that had seen better days. Nothing new there. The long flight of stairs leading up to the sanctuary were crumbling and dangerous. The wiring was old. There was a leak in the roof that had created a big water stain down the west wall. Mold in the basement, and maybe termite damage. It was a rickety place, and we were fortunate to get out without mishap. Nothing new there.

A few weeks later we had a meeting with people who were interested in the future of the little church. A surprising number showed up—30 or more. They lived all over the place—some in Pulaski, others as far away as Goodlettsville. They no longer attend the Frankewing church, but they have good memories of it: “My daddy helped lay the brick for that building. . . . I went to Sunday school there when I was a child. . . . My parents got married there.” And some of them said they’d like to try to make a go of it with the little church, to see if they could fix up the building and maybe have services there several times a year.

Our commission met to consider their request, and gave me the responsibility of writing a letter to the group. Here’s how I began the letter. “Our administrative commission met last week. We are not hopeful that the church has a future, but we have decided to give you a chance to revive the church.”

In the days since, I have pondered my own words. “We are not hopeful that the church has a future.” You understand why I wrote it, don’t you? Rickety steps, building in disrepair, members gone. The church has a past, but from our human point of view it appears not to have a future. Nothing new there.

And yet I wonder if a believer in Christ should ever write or say the words: “We are not hopeful.” In the case of the Frankewing church, I guess there is always the possibility that the little group will pull it off, and make the repairs and gather some people and find a minister to lead them in a worship service from time to time. It may happen like that.

But even if it does not, we affirm the presence of a living Lord who makes all things new. That little church may not survive as a congregation, but the Spirit of God which has moved in that congregation continues to move in our world. The words of scripture which were taught in that Sunday school still live in the lives of those who heard. The hymns of faith that were sung in that place still ring with truth. We may be able only to see the old and the tired and the dying. But through the eyes of faith we see a new age, a new world.

We know how our world is—it’s an old and tired and sometimes apparently hopeless place. The old prophet who wrote these words knew it, too. But we are invited to lift our eyes to see that which is clean and fresh and new. It is God’s thing, God’s new thing. “Behold, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” Do you not see it? May we live as those who know it is true. ✠