

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Beholding New Creation

2 Corinthians 5:17

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When a new world is born a new way of living becomes possible.

David Wilcox wrote a song years ago about the experience of becoming a new person, seeing the world in a whole new way. In the song, he tells a story about a girl named Laura who goes to Africa on an outward-bound trip. Before she left, she was meek, easily startled, attached to her distracted boyfriend Johnny who's first love was always his Camaro. But there on outward bound in Africa, she learned she was capable of so much more than she ever thought possible. One day, a hyena chased her through the jungle. Scrambling to get away she jumped and caught the lowest branch of a high tree. One hand slipped; one hand held. When she came to her sense, she was 10 feet off the ground. She didn't know she could jump that high. That was just one of the changes in her that summer.

And when she walked through the airport at home at the end of the summer, the song goes, it seemed kind of small, kind of stuffy. And people were getting out of her way. Silver bracelet on her bicep, a big old knife on her belt, hiking boots. Johnny picked her up at the airport and proceeded to scold her for putting her feet on the upholstery of his car. He didn't know that she was changed from the inside out, and so she sat back, folded her hands in her lap to enjoy her last ride in Johnny's Camaro.

Our reading this morning from 2 Corinthians speaks of a new world in Christ in the highest possible terms calling us, inviting us to a new way of living that goes with it. Let us hear it again:

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view. Even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, new creation.

The old has passed away.

Behold, the new has come.

You may notice that your translation of the Bible may read If anyone is in Christ, *he* is a new creation. Or it may read, if anyone is in Christ *there* is a new creation. Both are accurate translations of the original Greek and so both invite us to meditate on what this means for us and for the world through the different ways of reading the scripture.

If we read it as 'he or she is a new creation' then we emphasize how the individual in Christ is made new by grace through faith. We celebrate the new life that begins in us in Christ. And as we do, we remember passages in scripture like in John 3 'you must be born again'. We start a new life in Christ and are made new. This is a great encouragement. For some people their faith in Christ seems much like a continuation of the life they had before and that's good—a growth they experience. But for some people, Christ in their lives changes everything.

It's the source of hope when there was no hope; of joy when there was little joy; of the knowledge that they are loved and worthy to be loved when they only saw themselves as failures to be despised. Christ changes attitudes, behaviors, addictions, sinful behaviors. Being in Christ changes selfish people into selfless people; greedy people into giving people, hateful people into loving people. Being in Christ doesn't mean you're perfect or will be, but something changes. I've seen it over and over and over again. This is God's grace working in us. If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation.

As mysterious as this sounds, it's not entirely foreign to life's experiences. There are some days we wake up as a different person in a different world. The first time in the old apartment as a new family after the wedding. You were one and now you are two. You've changed. The whole home has changed and not just because it has a new resident. When your baby comes home for the first time. The world has changed, and you've changed. When you lose your parents and you're the oldest now in the generations of the family. The world changed and you've changed.

In the Apostle's Paul's eyes, what happens in us in Christ is a change of the highest order. It isn't just self-actualization, isn't just a new experience, or something bigger or better or different about us. We aren't tweaked. We are remade.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon emphasized this point: "A new person in Christ is not the old person purified, nor the old person improved, nor the old person in a better humor, nor the old person with additions and subtractions, nor the old person dressed in gorgeous robes. No, he is a new creature altogether – not the old stuff put into a new fashion, and the old material worked up into an improved form, but absolutely a new creation!"

Even given the utter way this reading stretches our imaginations; the individual perspective still doesn't exhaust the full scope of this verse. It can mean, there is a new creation. If anyone's in Christ, there is new creation. In other words, in Christ it's not just individuals made new, but all there is, is remade.

Think about the scope of this. We're talking about entering a new world. Experiences of being reborn into a new world wash over people at different times in life that may give us some small window into all that Paul has in mind. I remember moving to Miami, Florida, years ago. I loaded all my things in my little Honda Accord, where all my things fit, to make the long drive from Texas to south Florida. Once I saw the sign "Welcome to Florida," I thought, "I'm almost there." Nope. It turns out there are some other places besides Texas that are also pretty big. No one had told me that. That state just keeps on going on and on and on. From swampy, cypress-lined north Florida to RV camps and amusement parks to rows and rows of orange trees and avocado trees. The day I got my car stuck in the sand on the beach, I knew I was in a different world than one I'd ever known.

The coming and resurrection of Christ is an eschatological break between the old age and the age that rises with him. Christ's death and resurrection are the hinge of history. At his death, the age of darkness reigned. But at his resurrection, the age of Light began. Do we see this new age always? No, of course not, but if we walk by faith and not by sight, we believe that Christ's resurrection changed the fabric of all that is. It has changed life and death and hope and love

and purpose. We remember other passages in scripture like Colossians, “He is the head of all things...he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

We are made new. All is made new.

Behold, the Apostle invites us. Behold, all things are made new.

I like that word behold. We don’t use that word much anymore. I don’t hear anyone in the grocery store aisle say anything like “behold, these refried beans are on sale,” or in the stadium stands, “behold, that was an amazing play.”

Maybe we should bring it back. *Behold*. Look and see.

When you say “Behold,” it must be said with shared, implied astonishment at this mystery that you all participate in. I guess we do have ways of saying that, at least in the south. We don’t say behold, but we do say, “Lookie here. Can you believe this!” Or, “Well I’ll be.” Or “my, my, my” or “Well butter me up and call me a biscuit.”

Behold! Look, see. It’s new. Everything’s changed.

This is both great encouragement and great challenge. May it encourage you to remember this is God’s work in you, not your own. May you especially be encouraged by this when life is hard, when things aren’t going your way, when there is heartbreak, tragedy, when doubt and despair come home to visit.

Our Gospel reading tells us a farmer who scatters seed and does his work day by day but still doesn’t know how the seed sprouts and grows. And stands before it as a mystery. It’s a mystery, and so is this work of grace in us. The Gospel also describes life in Christ as a seed which starts small but grows and produces branches for birds to nest in. God’s work in us is beyond us and deep within us—in the floods and in the droughts. This is a great mystery and beyond our power. Let this be an encouragement.

Let it also be a challenge, to live with these new eyes, to walk on these new feet. To love with this new heart. We regard ourselves, our lives, other people, all creation as infused with divine dignity and grace.

Thomas Merton famously described this moment of epiphany like this for himself. He’d been living in the walls of his monastery for years, and had begun to think that only he and his fellow monks were really living a divinely graced life. Then one day he was standing on a busy street corner in a big busy city with a crowd of ordinary looking people, when he said, “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

You are. You are all shining like the sun. In Christ, no longer do we see ourselves or one another from merely a human point of view. We see children of God, beloved, redeemed, beautiful creatures made new in God's creation made new.

What better sign of this than baptism, in which we are buried into Christ's death and raised to walk with him in new life. And so now we come to be renewed in our baptisms as we celebrate with two of God's beloved children the life Christ lives in them.

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