

WGUMC January 13, 2012 New and Now
Isaiah 65:17-25 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2

I've been preaching about the new life for 24 years now. And just when I was starting to think that I have gotten too old and don't have anything new to say about being born anew, I was listening to NPR the other day, and I learned something new that really rocked my world. A guy was talking about peeling a banana. His co-worker, who was from China, asked him, "Why are you peeling your banana that way?" And he looked at her as if she were crazy. "You mean there is another way?"

Apparently, most people from Asia do it the way monkeys in the wild do. They turn the banana upside down (which is actually right-side up because bananas grow that way). They gently pinch the bottom until the peel cracks open and then they peel the banana from (what we call) bottom to top instead of top to bottom. That way they don't mush the top of the banana trying to break through the stem the way most of

us do. Instead, they hold onto the stem. It makes a convenient handle.

Listening in the car, I was dumbfounded. I had never considered that there might be a better way to eat a banana. When I got home, I tried it. The radio was right. Well, who would've guessed that turning a banana upside down could turn my whole world upside down! As far as bananas are concerned, I am born anew. And I am reminded that there are always new things to say about new life.

Goes to show you that new is new every day. In Isaiah, God says, " I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." [Is 65:17] And this was the good news that 2500 years ago the people returning from exile needed to hear. The years in Babylonia had turned their world inside out. And coming home, all they could see were scenes of devastation all around them.

Think the 9th Ward after Katrina or Rockaway Beach after Sandy.

The Babylonians had taken everything of value and destroyed what they couldn't take. The land was in ruins, and from this pit, Isaiah preaches rebirth. God is starting over. And in this new land, you won't have to contend with invaders (at least for a while). You will build houses *and* live in them. You will plant vineyards *and* eat their fruit. [65:21] Your children will be blessed not cursed. [65:23] Because God, even though you sinned, is more than ready to redeem. Even before you call, God will answer. [65:24]

The day is new. The time is now. I read in the paper a few days ago the story of a man returning from exile. Martin Stagi has just been released after serving over 15 years of a 26-to-life term as a three-striker. His third strike was a minor drug offense, and so he was eligible for resentencing because of Prop 36, which passed in November.

Stagi was a model inmate, worked seven days a week, prayed with other prisoners, had lots of family support, so he was among the first to be released. He's not bitter about the time he spent behind bars. He says, "I wasn't a very good person when I went in...It took [being locked up] to learn a lot about myself."

God says, "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." His heavenly judge has forgiven him, and his earthly judge has released him, so Stagi now has a brand new start in life. And last week he stepped out into a strange new world. Can you imagine? When he was sentenced, Bill Clinton was president. Gas was \$1.22/gallon. Internet access was dial-up. [Tracey Kaplan, *Mercury News*, Jan 11, 2013]

Stagi has to make his own way in this frightening world, but if he knows the God I know, he knows that God is more than ready to redeem, and that even before he calls, God will

answer. Now that answer will likely come in the form of a family member, a neighbor, or even a stranger, someone like you or me, responding to a brother in need.

You and I will probably never meet Martin Stagi, but it's too bad, because he could teach us that becoming a Christian is no less dramatic than returning from exile or being released from prison. Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" [2 Cor 5:17]

"If anyone is in Christ..." In other words, when you really get that God really loves you. When that knowledge takes the long trip from your head to your heart. When you don't just say that you believe it, but really feel it, then you are in Christ. My friends, that trip can take years. And grace may have to make several attempts. I was already ordained, had been a pastor for four years, before I was sure that I felt it in my heart. So don't lose heart.

"...there is a new creation." The everything old that needs to pass away is all the rubble from the past: the guilt and the regret, all the hurt from the bad things we've done and the good things we've failed to do, all the crap we're still carting around with us. For Christ can't create for us a new world if we insist on living in the rubble of the old one!

But you'll tell me, "I can't help it. What's done is done." And yes, the past is still with us, but in Christ, the past is transformed. It's like turning the banana upside down. Being in Christ gives us a whole new perspective on an old problem. What was a burden to us becomes a blessing; what was deep hurt, a chance for healing; what was a serious screw-up, an opening for salvation.

Is there anything new for you in the new year? Or are you still living in the rubble of the last one? I made a new year's resolution last year. I was going to start composting in 2012. Well, things got busy and I never got around to taking the class

or buying the bin. Then on December 31st, I thought, now is the time. Today is the day of salvation. So, with just a few hours left in the year, Hank, Kristen and I drove to the Guadalupe River Park visitor center and came home with a composter.

My friends, I waited too long last year, but this church can't wait for what's new in the new year. And so I'm glad that there are folks in this church ready to turn the banana upside down. Yes, we began 2013 where we ended 2012. The renovations that were planned years ago are still unfinished; Woodhaven is yet unpaid for. We are in debt, but not in despair, because God is about to create a new heaven and a new earth, and, if we're faithful, a new you and a new me.

And that's why I want you to stay after church today. I appeal to you to come and get a new perspective on some unfinished business. We have a proposal to make, because we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are not going to accept the grace of God in vain. That means that we are

choosing not to live in the past. Instead, we are going to live in the promise. We believe that what Isaiah promised the people of Israel pertains to us: that God is about to create this place as a joy and this people as a delight.

You should have been here yesterday for Barbara Stover's service. She told her kids that she didn't want a formal funeral, just a few scriptures and a short prayer. And if there was going to be anybody but family there, let it be not a celebration of her life, but a celebration of laughter. And it was both.

Afterwards, someone told me that they'd never been to a memorial service like that before. And I thought: if we can have this much fun at a funeral, think what we could do on a Sunday morning! I can't wait for everything that's coming new in this new year, but with your help, I don't have to. Paul says, "now is the acceptable time;...now is the day of salvation." [2 Cor 6:2] Have a banana.