

## HOW CAN WE CHANGE THE FUTURE?

(01/05/2025)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 12:1-2  
Revelation 21:1-7  
Mark 1:9-15

*“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*  
(Romans 12:2)

It seems especially meaningful to be gathered here in worship on the first Sunday of the new year. It feels like we are entering into or are already in what anthropologists call a liminal space. A liminal space is sort of betwixt and between. The limen, as you probably know, is the spot right under a door. It is not exactly in this room, and it is not exactly in the next. Yet it is actually in both.

In rites of passage, the initiatory rites that function in traditional cultures to move a young person from being a child to being an adult, or from being single to being married, the initiate is usually brought to or voluntarily enters a liminal space. This is the place where things happen. The person has experiences, receives teachings, and sometimes goes through ordeals that prepare him/her for the next stage in life as an individual and as a member of the tribe.

The elders, the ones who oversee the process function as mentors. Since they have already made the transition to the new stage, a higher developmental stage both psychologically and socially, they oversee the process of the initiation to ensure that it is carried through to a successful conclusion. When a rite of passage is successful, both the individual and the society benefit. The individual self-actualizes; he/she grows and matures developmentally. And the tribe, the society now receives the contributions of a psychologically mature adult.

On January 6, among other themes, the church celebrates Jesus' baptism. When I think of rites of passage, I think not only of Jesus' baptism, but even more of his experience in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. As recorded in the Gospel of Mark, the Holy Spirit drove the young Jesus into the desert. There he underwent hardship and deprivation for forty days. While he was in the liminal space of the wilderness, he was tested by Satan. The three temptations were the Adversary's efforts to pull Jesus off center, to keep him from stepping forward into the life to which God had called him. However, the temptations only served to strengthen, to solidify Jesus' sense of his own identity and his awareness of the unique gifts that he was called to share with his world and also with ours.

Something powerful must have happened to Jesus during his time alone in the wilderness. When he emerges from it at the conclusion of his forty-day retreat, he begins to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. He calls his disciples. He also discovers that he has the power to heal both physical and psychological dis-ease. He essentially becomes a change agent in creating a better world by helping human beings become themselves more fully as children of God.

This time of year, a sort of liminal time, reminds me of a story about an idealistic young trekker (sort of like me, at least twenty-five years ago) seeking words of wisdom from a Tibetan Buddhist master. The young man undertook a difficult journey (not unlike my journey to Lake Manasarovar and to Mount Kailas, the sacred mountain of Tibet that both Hindus and Buddhists believe to be the center of the world). The young man in the story embarked upon a trekking pilgrimage to a sacred lake, a sacred mountain, and to where the master lived in a small monastery high in the Himalayan Mountains in Tibet.

Sitting at the master's feet, the young man asked his question: "Can you tell me what the future will be like--both for me as an individual and for the world?"

"Certainly," said the master. "Today will be just like yesterday. Tomorrow will be just like today."

"So, the future will always be like the past?" asked the puzzled young man. "I find that quite discouraging."

"Yes," replied the master. "The future will be exactly like the past." After a long pause, the master continued: "Unless, of course, there's a change of consciousness."

We know there are going to be changes in the coming year. Computers will be even smaller and faster. AI will do our homework for us, perhaps even write our sermons for us, and put many journalists and novelists out of work. The economy will continue to shift to e-commerce, closing down brick and mortar stores and shopping malls. Something new that we can't even imagine will be invented that will replace something else--like CDs replaced records and tapes and DVDs replaced videos. We will design electric automobiles that will be even more fuel-efficient and will pollute the environment even less. We may even purchase a self-driving car. There will be amazing breakthroughs in medicine and medical technology.

There will be many changes in our world in the coming year. Governments will change, some through a democratic process and others through more violent means. This

is already happening in Syria as well as in Palestine. Tyrants will fall from power in some countries, while fascist dictators will come to power in others. We will solve some of the health problems that have plagued us (pun intended), while other unknown and even more deadly diseases will arise. Despite our finely tuned early warning systems, because we fail to care for our environment, natural disasters will take their deadly toll.

These are not the kind of changes that concern me. As a minister and a psychologist, I am much more interested in *whether people will change*. Will we continue to move forward into the 21st century while our hearts remain mired in the Stone Age? Despite the technological advances that make our world so much smaller, will we continue to be afraid of and prejudiced against people who are different from us? Will white supremacy, the patriarchy, and heterocentrism remain characteristic of large segments of our society, even large segments of our religious society? Will emerging national boundaries continue to be formed along ethnic lines, with people of one racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious group unable to live in peace with those of a different background or different belief system? Not to be judgmental, but that's really pathetic.

I would like the coming year, 2025, to be different from the last. I would like tomorrow to be different from today. I would like our country and our world to evolve. I cling to the hope that the kingdom of God that we can experience as a spiritual reality in our lives can increasingly influence the state of affairs in the world. In the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us, I would like to have God's will be done on earth. I would like the earth in general, and my life in particular, to become a little more like heaven. I would like the future into which we are stepping not only to advance technologically but also to deepen spiritually, just as I would like to become more deeply spiritual in the brief period of time that is still allotted to me.

I think we know what we need to do to prevent the kind of violence that a young man wreaked on innocent people in New Orleans this past week, a violence that, in his own words, was an expression of his belief that the world is divided into two groups, believers and non-believers, and that the believers should try to kill as many non-believers as possible. All we need to do is to dissolve the distinction between me and not-me, the distinction between self and other.

We need to break down the walls that divide us. This is a fundamental principle of both Buddhism and Christianity: that the distinction between self and other, between the other group and our group is an illusion. When we realize this, when we realize our deep interconnectedness with everyone, with all sentient beings; when we realize our deep interrelatedness, that we are all children of God, perhaps even incarnations of God,

and therefore we are all brothers and sisters, perhaps even all One, we will realize the foolishness of this kind of senseless violence.

This brings us back to the words of wisdom that were imparted to the young, idealistic trekker by the Tibetan Buddhist master. The only way that the future will change is if individual people change. We may be able to legislate equal rights for Black people and other minorities, but we cannot legislate an end to racism and prejudice. The only way we can end racism and prejudice is to change the hearts of people. The Supreme Court has decreed that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people should not be deprived of their constitutional rights, a stand that I hope they remember over the next few years. However, the only way to overcome homophobia and transphobia, just like Islamophobia and antisemitism, is through love.

As we noted in our candlelight service on Christmas Eve, we do this when we let Jesus into our heart, when we let Jesus become the center of our life. The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2:7, that we need to take on the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Just as the human Jesus emptied himself to be filled with the Spirit of God, so also, we should empty ourselves to be filled with the Spirit of Christ. If we are filled with the Spirit of Christ, if we take on the mind of Christ, how can we hate and persecute those who are different from us?

Today *can* be different from yesterday! Tomorrow *can* be different from today! The future *can* be different from the past! But it has to begin with us! When we dissolve the artificial distinctions between self and other, we are doing what Jesus called us to do in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: to realize that even those who are different from us, those whom we have regarded as our enemies, are really our neighbors. This is what it means to experience, to be in the kingdom of God! And this is the way the world changes. It begins with us as individuals.

As was illustrated in the story of the young trekker, the only way that our hearts can be changed is if our consciousness is changed. It is changed when we fill the center of our life with the Holy Spirit. When we become conscious of our deep connection with *all* of our brothers and sisters, even those who are different from us, we will be creating a new and better world.

As the master said, we *can* predict the future. We can predict it with a good deal of certainty. Today will be just like yesterday. Tomorrow will be just like today--unless, of course, there is a change of consciousness.

It all begins with us.

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