

Sermon Title: A New Spirit for a New Day
Sermon Text: Isaiah 65:17-25; Galatians 6:14-15
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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All of us are children of our times. Our culture deeply influences and shapes the way we “see” things. What we believe, what we value, what is important is all in some way shaped by our place in the world. These influential forces are at work in our family dynamics, in our church community, in our friendships and relationships, in business and recreation, in the educational opportunities we have, in government and the economy and the whole social context of our lives. These influences profoundly shape who we are and how we “see” life.

And this is as true of our religious context as any thing else. Our religious upbringing, the faith or lack thereof of our parents, the Christian tradition we happen to be part of, the teachers we have had, all of these things have influenced our faith.

So how we “see” things, how we see God and our relationship with God and our place in the world is profoundly influenced by all these forces at work in our culture and in the context out of which we live our daily lives.

When we understand this it gives us a kind of sensitivity and tolerance and maybe even appreciation for different ways of “seeing” and understanding. But that’s not always the case.

Peter Rollins in his book, “How (Not) to Speak of God,” tells an old anecdote about a mystic, an evangelical pastor and a fundamentalist preacher all dying on the same day. They awake to find themselves in a waiting area beside the pearly gates. They are greeted by Peter who informs them that before they can enter heaven they must be interviewed by Jesus concerning the state of their doctrine. The first to be called forward is the mystic. After a few hours the mystic reappears with a smile and says, “I thought I had it all wrong.”

Then Peter signals to the evangelical pastor. After a full day has passed the pastor reappears with a frown and says to himself, “How could I have been so foolish!” Finally Peter asks the fundamentalist preacher to follow him. The preacher picks up his well-worn Bible and walks into the room. After several days there is still no sign of the preacher. Then finally the door swings open and Jesus himself appears and exclaims, “How could I have it got so wrong!”

I have been in conversation with some of those preachers. How we “see” God and how we live out our faith is shaped by these influences in our lives. Obviously we make choices; we

are not robots. We have the freedom to choose, but if we are honest we all have to admit that our choices are greatly influenced by these cultural dynamics that we are a part of.

In the world of Jesus there were forces at work in the culture influencing and shaping how the early followers of Jesus understood their faith. Their faith did not originate out of a vacuum; there were powerful influences in their historical context that helped to give it shape.

One of these forces that scholars have identified at work in the Jewish world of Jesus' time is what has been called an apocalyptic orientation. My purpose today is not to go into any elaborate explanation of this way of thinking; but it is important to know that this was a prevalent way of "seeing" things in Jesus' world.

One key element of this way of "seeing" that is important in understanding the New Testament is the idea of two ages, two periods or states of existence. According to this way of thinking there are two ages, the age where sin and wickedness is dominant and an age that will supersede the age of sin and death where righteousness and peace prevail.

As the first followers of Jesus began to reflect on his life, death and resurrection they interpreted it light of the two ages. In other words this perspective on the two ages, the age of sin and the age of righteousness, provided the framework for their understanding of the significance of the Christ Event—his life, death and resurrection. Jesus himself seems to have understood his mission within this framework. These early Christians believed that the new age, the age of peace and righteousness, the age of salvation when all would be made whole, and evil banished, began with Christ. It hasn't come fully by any means, but in Christ the Spirit of the new age is here. The old age of sin is passing away. It is doomed because Jesus, the Christ has triumphed. The era of redemption and transformation, where the love of God will prevail, is destined to take its place. And most of these early Christians envisioned the fullness of the new age coming rather suddenly with Christ's return.

With that in mind let's read Isaiah 65:17-25:

*17 "Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,*

*for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.*

*19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.*

*20 "Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach ^[a] a hundred
will be considered accursed.*

*21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.*

*23 They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.*

*24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.*

*25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the LORD.*

Here a new age is envisioned by the prophet. It is framed within the prophet's own historical context which anticipates Israel's restoration to the land. But beyond that there is something glorious about this.

The prophets were poets; they spoke with the imagination of poets and used poetic language and we do them an injustice if we interpret their message too literally. But what is clear is that the prophet envisages a new day where a new spirit will prevail. Often in the prophetic literature this is called "the Day of the Lord"—a day of judgment when the wrongs of the world are rectified and a day of salvation, when all things are made whole. The prophet is looking forward to this glorious new day.

The early Christians interpreted this in light of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and come to believe that the new day had come with Christ. It is here, but not completely.

Next I am reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In Galatians 6:14-15 we read:

14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which^[a] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

The "world" here is the world that is passing away, the old age. Paul is claiming to be a participant with Jesus in his death. He is saying that in some way he died with Jesus to the "world," to the old age. Now what matters is his participation with Christ in the new creation, the new age.

When Paul says that what counts is a new creation, he is not talking about individual experience, he is talking about the new age, the new world ushered in through Jesus and that in Jesus will one day triumph. It is what Jesus called "the kingdom of God" and what Matthew's gospel calls "the kingdom of heaven."

This is what counts—our participation, our engagement, our cooperation in the new creation, the kingdom of God. The way we do that is through our participation in the death of Christ; in Christ we die to the world, the old age, its values, its philosophy, its way of "seeing"—that is based on things like pride and greed and selfish ambition. In Christ we die to that, so that we can live in the kingdom of God, in the new creation, that is characterized by love and grace and compassion and service and justice for all people.

We live in between the times, in between the passing away of the old age of sin and death and the coming of the new age of peace and righteousness. We live in the overlap of the

ages. The practical question is this: what age will shape our identity and constitute our security. By identity I mean a sense of who we are and by security I mean what we actually trust in. Who or what will tell us who we are and in whom or what will we trust? Those are huge issues.

One way of looking at it is like this. When we are governed by the world, by the old age, we tend to be characterized by our attachments. We see this in our attachment to our possessions; we see this in our attachment to the need for honor or power or position; we see this in our attachment to the need to be in control, to be in power, to have clout or status, to be known as successful. And sometimes this can take a very evil turn, but it doesn't have to. We can be known as very "good" people and still be dominated by the old age, by the world. This is what Paul is talking about when he says in his letter to the Romans, "do not be conformed to this world"—do not let these things shape your identity and become the basis of your security.

On the other hand, when we are governed by the spirit of the new creation, the new age, which is the Spirit of Christ, we are known for our "relinquishment." We are able to let go of our need for power and position, we are able to relinquish our pride and our selfish ambition so that that we can lovingly give ourselves in service to our world.

This is what Paul says in Gal. 5:6. He says, "For in Christ Jesus (when we participate in Christ in the new creation) neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value (there were those who were claiming that it mattered). The only thing that counts is faith (not belief, but trust and obedience) expressing itself through love." That's the way of the kingdom of God, the new creation. Trust in God that expresses itself through love for others.

This is what Christ is asking of each of us—to be crucified to the world, to de-attach ourselves, to relinquish that way of life and to trust God with our lives by loving people the way God in Christ loves people.

For most of us this is a daily struggle; it is for me. And I do not always win this struggle. But when I do it can be liberating. What does it mean to be free of the attachments of this age. It means things like:

"I don't have to win."

"I don't have to be 'somebody' in the world because I know I am 'somebody' in Christ.

"I do not need a lot of 'stuff' to make me happy.'

"I do not need to be 'honored' or 'seen' by others"

When our identity and security are in God and not the world then the world can't really take away our worth or value or our sense of identity and purpose. We are truly free.

The movie called “The Mission” tells the story of a Jesuit priest who is commissioned to build a mission in South America for the Guarani Indians.

On the way the priest hooks up with Mendoza (played by Robert NeNiro) who is a slave trader. Mendoza is plagued by guilt and regret and is desperate for some peace. He killed his brother in a jealous rage and he has committed great treachery against the Guarani Indians capturing and selling a number of them into slavery.

In a conversation with the priest Mendoza says, “For me there is no redemption.” But the priest is persistent in his claim that there can be redemption, that there is a way out. But Mendoza says, “There is no penance hard enough for me.” And the priest says, ‘But do you dare try it?’ And Mendoza replies, “Do I dare? Do you dare to see it fail?” But Mendoza agrees to try.

They begin the arduous journey to the Indian village. But before they begin the priest straps on Mendoza’s back 100 pounds of armor. They travel over cliffs and waterfalls, and it is grueling for someone with 100 pounds of armor on his back.

They finally reach their destination and the Indians are excited to see the priest. But when they recognize Mendoza, it becomes a moment of truth. One of the Indian men unsheathes a knife and holds it to Mendoza’s neck. Mendoza remains calm and prepares to receive his justly deserved punishment. But then, in an unexpected demonstration of grace, the Indian removes the knife from his throat and cuts the pack of armor free that has been strapped to his back throughout the journey. It is a deeply moving scene as we watch the armor fall off the slave trader’s back and clank down the mountainside.

Suddenly Mendoza is overwhelmed at the grace that has been given him and he begins to sob uncontrollably as he falls to the ground and clings to the Indian’s feet in contrition and repentance.

I have never had that kind of experience, maybe you have. But I do know that being able to relinquish the attachments that enslave us to this old age is liberating.

As we begin a new year my desire is to not be too attached to this world, to this old age that is passing away. We are all attached to some degree and I cannot shake that attachment completely, but I don’t want to let this world shape my identity; I don’t want this old age to tell me who I am. I would like to think that if my circumstances changed and I lost my possessions or if I lost my position, I would still be okay because I’m not trusting in these things for my identity and security. I hope you feel the same way.

God invites us to share in that which is lasting—to put our trust in God’s goodness and grace and to serve our world in the Spirit of Christ, which is the power of the new creation, the power of divine love.

Dear God,

All of us have been shaped by the influences in our world in profound ways, in ways that are both helpful and harmful. Help us not to be so attached to the values and ways of this world that is passing away. Rather, help us to live out Christ’s death and our participation in it—to die to this world so that we might live for you, O God, and be able to serve each other and our world in the Spirit of Christ.

May the Spirit of Christ name us and may the Spirit of Christ empower us so that our identity and security (who we are and what we trust in) is found not in this world, but in you O God and your new creation.

For your kingdom’s sake I pray in the name of Christ, our Lord, Amen