

BRINGING IN THE NEW

--Whose mind has not been focused over the past week on the changing of the year, as once more the old ceremoniously gives way to the new? A full course of twelve months has been completed, and now we find ourselves back at the beginning, preparing again to set out afresh.

Even ancient peoples are wholly familiar with this cycle. In fact, they are far more keenly perceptive about it than we are. Through conscientious observation that perhaps involves generations of watchers, they can plainly see that, over the months, the rising sun predictably moves on the horizon, from a far right position to the south, at the Winter Solstice (roughly at the time when we are celebrating Christmas), to a far left position to the north, at the Summer Solstice--and then, over the following six months, slowly moves back to its starting point, appearing to fulfill its annual course.

All that solar drift appears to carry us far away from our point of origin and then returns us right back to it once more, marking the passage of a year--whereupon the whole process repeats itself yet again.

For those same ancients, there is something positively numinous--which is to say, profoundly spiritual--about this repetitive pattern. Back then, it represents prized secret knowledge that is the province of the astronomer-priests of these cultures, the sort of thing that is not to be shared with those who cannot possibly appreciate its full value. To be conscious of this sacred movement in the skies is to be linked to the gods themselves. To be connected intentionally to these happenings in the heavens is to grasp a correspondence to what is to be occurring on earth--when to plant and when to harvest, when to expect cooperating with the season of the resting of fields and when to expect active engaging in the season of growth.

Though now but pale and blurred versions of what the ancients once understand, all this stirring mystery is reflected in our New Year's observances in market squares and city centers around our planet. Built into the very structure of a universe of spinning planets making the rounds of their suns, there is something about this annual passage which is felt to be somehow instructive about life itself. Over these days, we get the feeling that we have, in some fundamental way, now come full circle.

Even we, who rarely attend to the skies anymore, have this felt-sense that there is something of summoning opportunity connected to this moment. Once again, the old is gone, the new has come. It is as though there is a brief opening in time where all things are possible, just as they were back at the first moment of creation. That vague and mostly-unconscious sense gives rise among us to many a ritualized "resolution" as part of this annual passage, with all its rich prospects for renewal.

--Seven centuries before the zero-year for Christians, we hear just such thoughts echoed in the words of God, as they come through the prophet Isaiah: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth . . ." (43.18-19a).

Do not, the prophet is suggesting, get hung-up "back there" somewhere. The proper orientation of the people of God always is forward, as eye and ear strain to catch the first signs of the next new thing that God will undertake with them. To reclaim the wonder of the ancients, to join God in this welcoming to newness, is to participate in a moment of re-creation. Whatever has been is no longer; what is to come is just beginning faintly to take shape. Surely, these early days in a new year are fluid and open-ended, pregnant with all manner of potential. Yes, there is abundant opportunity at hand.

If God is part of human process--certainly one of our core-beliefs--then there will always be movement. If we

are in league with the God of this dynamically spinning, birthing, exploding universe, we will find no quarter to settling down, let alone ever to settling for. As long as faithful people have breath in their bodies, they will find that there is no end to the re-newing that God will instigate. When that periodic return is made to the starting point, then, it is never a question of merely going in circles, but of being purposefully positioned to begin again.

What better time than here, at this crack between two years, for us to focus on all these deep, universal themes?

--In transitioning from Isaiah to Jesus, these images concerning the old and new turn into that of wine--symbolical of life and transformation--and of the skins designed to hold that wine.

“Do not foolishly consider,” Jesus declares, “putting new wine into old wineskins. That is the prescription only for cracking, splitting skins and for lost wine. New wine must be carefully entrusted to new and supple wineskins.”

In other words, the new initiatives of God cannot be expected to fit neatly into the safe and worn containers of what we used to think, or how we are comfortably accustomed to approaching things (you know, “we’ve always done it that way”), or what we have vainly continued to practice for decades always hoping for different results (and rarely getting it).

“New” means, well, new--like officially going on record with the United Church of Christ to be identified as one of its Open and Affirming congregations; like re-envisioning what the UCC’s truly “extravagant welcome” might look like here at St. John’s; like rewriting parts of our Constitution & By-Laws to allow for a fresh approach to ministry and mission; like calling and electing and, this morning, installing a small army of volunteers to carry forward this re-imagined work among us and through us. I’d say there’s “new” there.

--In order, however, is a final caveat, as we prepare to move on, as we ready ourselves to move ahead: Let us never become so preoccupied with the skins--with the containing forms of conceptual framework and design, or of the mechanics of policy and procedure--that we miss the critical importance of the new wine, of the new life. If that is absent, as we presume to advance into this period of newness, the new wineskin will be of no real use to us. What possible advantage is even the most fabulous new wineskin if its contents are the same old wine?

If we are to make the most, the very most, of this open and favorable moment in time, then we must do better than just to pour the old wine into the new skins and pretend that it’s new wine. If that occurs, surely, God’s palate will not be fooled for very long, and our disappointed aspirations will not be far behind.

We can successfully bring the new into our structure and administration and program only if we have first brought the new into ourselves. Just as the ancients understand, to be conscious of this sacred cycle evident in the heavens is to be linked very personally to the God who is obliquely experienced through it.

--Those ancients, persistently gazing heavenward, understand the conclusion of one year and the opening of another to be “auspicious.” That is the most perfect of words to use in characterizing where, on this sixth day of a new year, we find ourselves.

Auspicious. That is an old adjective, dating back to perhaps the late 1500’s, suggesting a promising sign, a good omen. The word means literally “divination by observing the flight of birds”--which is to say, discerning and forecasting the direction and quality of the future by paying attention to the not-so-random cues of Nature. Why, it’s like linking the predictable movements of sun or moon or planets to the purposes of God. Divining the future by observing the flight of birds. Auspicious.

That leaves us with a compelling question: What is it here, I wonder, that is about to take flight?