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Title	⇒ A New Year's Revelation
Scripture	Titus 3: 4-7
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place	Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date	January 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2012
Calendar	1 <sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

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Minister: Peace be with you  
**Congregation: And also with you**



Happy New Year.

A year that is the next one up to bat, shaping the rest of your one life.

There's a story about Jesus and his disciples. You haven't heard it before because it's not in the Bible, meaning that it's one of those stories meant to help us think of something in a new way; and although it may be helpful, it is not authoritative in the way that other Bible stories are. I'll tell you the first half of it now, and the second half at the end of my New Year's Day message to you this morning. Here's Part 1.

One day Jesus said to his disciples: "I'd like you to carry a stone for Me." He didn't give any explanation. So the disciples looked around for a stone to carry, and Peter, being the practical sort, sought out the smallest stone he could possibly find. After all, Jesus didn't give any regulations for weight and size! So he put it in his pocket. Jesus then said: "Follow Me." He led them on a journey. About noontime Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hand and all the stones turned to bread. He said, "Now it's time for lunch." In a few seconds, Peter's lunch was over. When lunch was done Jesus told them to stand up. He said again, "I'd like you to carry a stone for Me." This time Peter said, "Aha! Now I get it!" So he looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back and it was painful, it made him stagger. But he said, "I can't wait for supper." Jesus then said: "Follow Me." That's Part 1.



I'm not the best at making New Year's Resolutions. I've broken too many of them. But I'm still not quite as cynical about it as Mark Twain. Here is what he says: "New Year's is a harmless annual institution, of no particular use to anybody save as a scapegoat for promiscuous drunks, and friendly calls and humbug resolutions." Another anonymous person recorded their past six New Year's resolutions for us to identify within them and ourselves a similar scepticism about making promises that, we have a sneaking suspicion, just tend to hit the garbage bin about as fast as the wrapping paper on Boxing Day. Here they are, from our anonymous friend: 2007: I will get my weight down below 180 pounds. 2008: I will follow my new diet religiously until I get below 200 pounds. 2009: I will develop a realistic attitude about my weight. 2010: I will work out two days a week. 2011: I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week. 2012: I will stop making New Year's resolutions.

So this year I am not making a New Year's Resolution. Rather, I am trying to take seriously a New Year's *revelation*, which perhaps holds the greatest and most life-changing prospect out there: *that God makes all things new*. I like this revelation—that *God* makes all things new—because it serves as a reminder that the one doing

the important, life-changing work is not me, but he. And he is always at work. For my part, I just need to stop putting anchors and chains and dead weights and bridles on the God who is working at creating a magnificent future that includes normal folk like you and me.

You see, it's connected to what I said on Christmas Eve: That Christmas is not about just surviving or keeping a white-knuckled grip on our sanity or trying to re-create something in the past or tradition—but is an invitation to answer a single question again and again; a question that just might be the most important one we ever answer: How are we going to be reborn to honour this Prince of Grace? It's about change. It's about transformation. It's about renewal. Hear this week's reading from Titus in the New Testament:

*[The Lord] saved us... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

Notice what it didn't say. It didn't say that the Lord saved us... and then nothing happened. It says the Lord saved us... rebirth... renewal.

The experienced apostle Paul is writing to Titus as he goes about his ministry in a place called Crete (one of the beautiful islands in the Mediterranean Sea.) Paul has the good sense to remind Titus of this elemental, primary, fundamental part of the Christmas faith we all share. Again, this is what he says: “[The Lord] saved us... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” It's about renewal. That passage is said in the context of the spirit of Christmas—of Christ's mission, coming into the world to save, forgive and re-create. But as I have said before, we resist change, and quite often in the church. It's as if on our most foggy days we are changephobics. There's an old expression about it. “What are the last 7 words of a church? But we've always done it that way.” Soon after, the doors usually lock shut.

But change is on special in the restaurant of modern culture. After I had constructed most of this message I read an article published on Friday in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper about our human ability to adapt to novelty and change. It said that “as we move forward, some scientists foresee a new kind of evolutionary development that involves somehow meshing bodies and machines. Brain chips may sound like science fiction,” the author writes, “but serious research by MIT's robotics whiz Rodney Brooks and other suggest that the idea is not so far-fetched.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the jury is out on that one, but the fact remains that in a changing world how we follow Christ will need to be increasingly sensitive to the fact that if Jesus were to have come to earth today chances are that among lawyers and plumbers, homemakers and homeless, he would have attracted computer programmers, internet geeks and media mavens—people who try to see the present world through the lens of the future with a gasp of hope.

But part of the more basic human problem—at least for Christians—is that we know that God doesn't change; and so we think we shouldn't either.

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But we are helped on New Year's Day in our thinking about change and renewal when we think about people like how renowned writer C.S. Lewis thinks about them. He says that a person is like the arc of a waterfall. Think about it for a second; it's brilliant. From a scientific perspective, the molecules and everything else that make up our bodies are constantly moving on and being replaced. Technically, there is not a single part of us that is the same from when we were first born. Even our bones have completely regenerated themselves. Even our scars have new skin and flesh. Our hair and fingernails grow out and are replaced. All of us, even the material that makes up our heart replenishes itself so there is none of the same flesh that was there when we were born. All of us is physically different. We are being physically replaced all the time. And yet, we have the same names. There is something that still makes us *us* despite all this updating. And at the base of all this is the foundational truth that we can't not change. We are always changing. It's our very nature.

Even our thinking changes. And I'm not just talking about how when we are little we think that it's dark out at night because the sun is sleeping and then how when we're older we realize what the sun is and that it and

not a person and that planets are rotating and spinning and all that stuff. I'm talking about how even when we know a rock-solid and unchanging truth about our faith like "Jesus is our Saviour"—how that means one thing when things are going our way and when our marriage is good and when we're feeling satisfied with our work; and how the meaning of that statement that "Jesus is our Saviour" changes by *deepening* when our marriage is falling apart or when we are depressed or when we are undergoing chemotherapy. We change in part because we deepen. We evolve. We can't *not* change.

Lewis continues his thought about the nature of people by saying that we are like the arc of a waterfall. The water is always changing, flowing over the top and landing at the bottom and continuing on. And yet, we still call that waterfall by a name that you can read on a map whether it be "St. Anne's Falls" or "Niagara Falls" or whatever. That's people. Replenishing skin and bones, but still something there that is us. Change is inevitable. The question is: What kind of change do we want to be? It's going to happen. So we had better be deliberate about the *kind* of change we want to be. "[The Lord] saved us," Scripture says, "through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

What *kind* of change do we want to be? What kind of change do we want to be as we begin 2012? A year that is the next one up to bat, shaping the rest of your one life.



Consider the story by Charles Dickens of Ebenezer Scrooge. I reminded you about this in my annual Christmas letter to the congregation. It's one of those great Christmas stories and movies. I imagine it in the old black and white version. Scrooge devoted his life to two pursuits: making himself rich and everyone else miserable. On an unsuspecting, otherwise normal Christmas Eve, a bizarre nightmare disturbs his sleep. He is visited by three spirits. First: the Spirit of Christmas Past reminds him of how his long-ago happiness has shrivelled up and his capacity for love has been smothered by his relentless pursuit of money. I imagine that line in another Christmas children's classes, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and the description of the Grinch that his heart was perhaps two sizes too small. Scrooge feels some regret—for a few moments—but falls asleep again, determined to remain as he is.<sup>2</sup>

He's interrupted a second time, this time by the Spirit of Christmas Present, who shows him both the Cratchit family and his nephew Fred's family, who, though Scrooge has been anything but kind to them, think pretty well of him. The contrast between their generosity and Scrooge's meanness is painful; yet he will not change.

Finally the Spirit of Christmas Yet-to-Come appears, robed in black and frightening Scrooge half to death. In a vision of the future he sees the Cratchit family now bereft of Tiny Tim. He also sees a rich miser, whose death saddens nobody and whose corpse ends up being robbed. It's the future that awaits Scrooge—a fate he can avoid if he'll change. In this magnificent story, Dickens goes to dramatic lengths to convince us that a person can in fact be changed. Reborn, actually. At Christmas, the motivation is a new King in our midst. Being reborn to honour this Prince of Grace. When a new King arrives on the scene, the rules are different; new things are expected; the possibilities and directions of life change course. Our change, our prospect of renewal, if it is to be worthwhile, is connected to something outside of ourselves. Do you see it?



Let's return for a moment to our story. Part B. Jesus has asked his followers to carry stones for him, and then at lunch time changed their stones to food. And Peter, having chosen a near pebble, now famished from his bite-sized lunch, thinks he gets it. When lunch was done Jesus told them to stand up. He said again, "I'd like you to carry a stone for Me." This time Peter said, "Aha! Now I get it!" So he looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back and it was painful, it made him stagger. But he said, "I can't wait for supper." Jesus then said: "Follow Me."

He led them on a journey, with Peter barely being able to keep up. Around supper time Jesus led them to the side of a river. He said, “Now everyone throw your stones into the water.” They did. Then he said, “Follow Me,” and began to walk. Peter and the others looked at him dumbfounded. Jesus sighed and said, “Don’t you remember what I asked you to do? Who were you carrying the stone *for?*”<sup>3</sup>

Peter was carrying the stone for himself, not Jesus. Scrooge was living for himself, not someone else. When is our spirituality about us—me, myself, and I—rather than increasing harmony with the new born King? Because who are you carrying the stone for makes all the difference in the world.

Change is meaningful and given real teeth when we realize who it is we’re doing it for. Gerry was only 37 when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had a four year old daughter, Olivia. It’s the same principle. Change is meaningful and given real teeth when we realize who it is we’re changing for. Who it is we’re living for. And for us, who it is we’re serving. And so we change. Because God is alive—and he has a pretty busy schedule in 2012 making all things new. How are we going to be reborn to honour this new-born Prince of Grace?



And so this year I avoid making a New Year’s Resolution. Not to lose some weight, although I need to. Not to be so self-defeating, although that would help me. Not to pray more, although we all need to. And not to spend more time with my friends, although it would make me happier. And I don’t want you to dissuade you from yours—I’m sure if you have one it’s very honourable. But just consider the New Year’s *revelation*—inspired here by our Scripture in Titus—that God makes all things new. That’s what he does. Change happens. It’s inevitable. And as far as each of your lives go, I don’t know what it will be for you. My hope is that we simply think of change not as an enemy, but maybe, just maybe, as a not-so-subtle nudge from the Holy Spirit, encouraging us and reminding us that God’s best days are always in front of us.

With all my heart I wish you a Happy New Year.  
How will you honour this new-born Prince of Grace?




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<sup>1</sup> The article was titled “The torrent of novelty: Are our brains equipped to handle today’s rate of innovation?” and was written by Winifred Gallagher. I accessed in on [www.globeandmail.com](http://www.globeandmail.com) on December 31, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> This summary of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (first published in 1843) is here adapted from a summary by The Rev. Dr. Clyde Ervine, Minister at Central Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, ON. He gave it in a sermon during the Stewards by Design conference at YMCA Geneva Park, Orillia, ON in October 2011.

<sup>3</sup> This story is told in: Elisabeth Elliot, *These Strange Ashes* (Harper and Row, 1975), 132.