

A New Year's Sermon in Two Parts
January 1, 2012
All Souls Church
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One: Burning the Old Year

Paper is less and less a necessity in our lives. We have our receipts sent to our email we pay our bills online and bring our own bags here and there. Paper resumes are largely a thing of the past and newspaper sales dwindle. Fliers, daily papers, ads and circulars, passed to us on the street or the subway, get tossed at the end of our ride or when we reach our destination.

Paper is less and less a necessity in our lives. And yet, if you are like me, by year's end, you have accumulated a shoebox (here you can insert your container of choice—drawers, file folders, etc.) full of paper to be filed, archived or thrown away. Amongst the stray receipts and to-do lists—gladly very easy to dispose of-- there are the more difficult piles-- always the hand scrawled notes on scraps of papers, the thoughtful holiday cards, the ephemera from art, politics and life with which I simply cannot bear to part.

This year, I found myself sifting through piles of beautiful hand-made cards, lovingly delivered to me by the church school on the occasion of my ordination last April. I treasure each of these jewels, artifacts of meaning in my life. I recall the face of every child as they proudly presented their card to me. I worry I will forget. So, faced with this dilemma, I choose to hold on to each piece of construction paper, vowing to revisit it again next year with a grateful, nostalgic heart.

What to do with this paper accumulation of meaning? Surely, we cannot hold onto every note, every card, as precious as each may seem. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye describes one way of facing the year-end dilemma. Her poem "Burning the Old Year" describes a bold ritual of sending it all into the fire—the meaningful and the superficial, each with its own flourish of smoke, color, sizzle and burn. She writes:

Letters swallow themselves in seconds.
Notes friends tied to the doorknob,
transparent scarlet paper,
sizzle like moth wings,
marry the air.

So much of any year is flammable,
lists of vegetables, partial poems.
Orange swirling flame of days,
so little is a stone.

At the new year, many people choose to mark time by symbolically burning away the negative parts of the old year—kindling slips of newsprint or tissue paper scrawled with their regrets or old patterns to be released. The meaning and the muck of her year—the

good and the bad-- all goes into the fire and is returned to ash once again.

The poet writes:

Where there was something and suddenly isn't,
an absence shouts, celebrates, leaves a space.
I begin again with the smallest numbers.

There is much truth in the poet's process, I think, risky though it seems to my sentimental heart. The poet invites us into our own process of reflection on the losses and the joys of the old year, whether found on slips of paper or inscribed deeply in our hearts. Her message is a familiar one, often found in the Hebrew bible. I am reminded of the scripture from 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, do you not perceive it?

I have always found this scripture challenging in its charge. It is implied that to turn away from what we know-- the past—and to turn towards what we do not—the future. The unknown holds both mystery and possibility. To heed the call of the prophet and the poet—to “forget the former things” is a leap of faith, perhaps one of the most difficult practices in our spiritual lives.

There are, to be sure, things we'd like to forget-- the times we've fallen short or failed in the past year. There are the things left undone, the broken relationships and negative habits. Often we wish these were easier to forget than they are. But there are those things we struggle to forget or don't want to. For some of us, the last year brought loss and suffering that still looms large in our lives. A lagging economy has continued to challenge many people financially and breed a growing sense of despair in the future.

Some of us are grieving, emerging from the holidays without the company of a loved one for the first time. I count myself among the grieving, having experienced the loss of my dear friend Elaine this October. She died of cancer too young at the age of 33. To leave my grief behind can feel like abandoning her memory. My grief reminds me of how she remains present and important in my life, even though her absence reminds me she is gone. It is hard to let go.

While some of us are trying to let go, others of us are holding onto the great joy we experienced in the year gone by--celebrations, milestones and successes. The nation experienced collective joy as a new social movement for economic justice was born. We don't want to forget these peak experiences—perhaps we worry that our best days are behind us.

The poet and the prophet both invite a bold invitation to allow the old year to pass away: the meaning and the muck. “Burn the old year,” the poet beckons. “Do not consider the things of old,” urges the prophet. Offering gratitude and compassion for our experience of both great joy and great loss in the year gone by, are we ready to let the old year go? Lets lean into the mystery of the unknown together, for we are “about to do a newthing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Part Two: To the New Year

So this is where we have chosen to start this New Year’s Day, to worship together in this sanctuary of beauty, memory and hope. On a day where you have many other places you could be I feel such gratitude to share this day with you in church, an opportunity to reflect and seek together.

I am often awed by the beauty of this sacred space and its ability to hold such a range of our human experience as a congregation. The sanctuary remains, elegant and serene as it was yesterday, and yet, we come this morning to find meaning in the passing of time and to witness to our shared life as a community. Whether you are here today for the first time or have been a member for fifty years, I hope you have a sense that this sanctuary is a place wide and deep enough to hold your search for meaning and community, in this season and all the seasons of your life.

In the year gone by, this sanctuary has held the congregation as we commemorated the ten-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It has held the congregation as we honored the lives of beloved members of this who have passed on. Through the seasons, in these pews, we sang hymns and experienced, again and again the beauty of the All Souls choir. We heard powerful preaching from the All Souls ministers, youth, board, and guests—messages that have healed, inspired and challenged. In the new year, we will do it all again, enacting the rituals of our faith which hold the moments of our lives, just as this sanctuary holds us today.

The poet writes:
so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible

So this is the sound of you, new year, if we have ears to hear you. The sound of the new year is the hush of prayer and quiet contemplation. The sound of the new year is the cheerful voice of a welcomer or the comforting voice of treasured friend. The sound of the new year is a baby cooing from the back of the sanctuary as she experiences the peace of this sacred space. The sound of the new year is laughing easily and forgiving quickly. The sound of the new year is a message of hope and healing in a chaotic world still filled with possibility, as we raise our voices in song and say “Yes to life.”

We have come, with our lives such as they are, to welcome the new year in beloved community. May we be gentle with ourselves and with one another, bringing peace to our homes and our shared life together. May the promise of the new year unfold,

revealing what is possible for all of our lives as we join together in worship, community and service.

Amen