

January 2, 2000  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
Mark James Toone

## ALL THINGS NEW

### *Revelation 21:1-7*

Welcome to the new millennium! It's nice to see that you all survived. Looks like Y2K's bark was worse than his bite. Now our family has only one problem facing it. We are going to be eating canned Chef Boy-ar-dee ravioli for the next six months! There's something kind of sick about spending a lot of money on emergency preparedness. There's a part of you that is rather disappointed when you don't get to use all that cool stuff you bought!

Although I must say, our family did not come through the New Year entirely unscathed. I wouldn't have believed it possible but terrorists struck the Toone household on New Years Eve day! I found this message in our mailbox...which, by the way, is a federal offense! You will notice how cleverly the perpetrators cut out individual letters from magazines to form the message. "...and on the eighth day God created toilet paper and it was good! Your Chapel Hill friends." Well, these scoundrels are no friends of mine! Because I found, wrapped around my mailbox, one perfectly good roll of Kirkland toilet paper...the soft kind. You may think you were clever, but you overlooked one thing. You made the mistake of using a piece of paper that had writing on the back of it. See. Right here. That will be your downfall.

As I sat watching the countdown to the new millennium Friday night, I must admit that I discovered my heart was beating rapidly. I was excited. Just think! We were experiencing a moment that has been shared by only one other generation in the history of Western Civilization. And should the Lord tarry, it won't be experienced again for another 50 generations. The closing of a millennium...of 1000 years of human history. All that occurred, both good and horrific, over the past ten centuries...we have put a big period to the end of it. Full stop, as they say in Britain. And we are starting over. A new year, a new century, a new millennium. Remarkable.

The scriptures have a great deal to say about fresh starts...new things. The book we are studying, Revelation, contains one of the most famous "new things" passage in the Bible. For this special Sunday, let's jump out of order for a moment and turn to Revelation 21. I am not going to exposit it this morning. I will save that for when we return to it in the spring. But I thought it would be a great reflection for this new millennium Sunday as we reaffirm together our baptismal vows. (Read text)

As I said, the Bible is full of "new" talk. The Psalmist says, "He has put a **new** song in my heart. Jesus said, "A **new** commandment I give to you. Love one another." Every communion service we remind ourselves of his words at the Last Supper: "The cup is the **new** covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins." Some of the most beloved "new" words come from Paul in II Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new** creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come!"

This Revelation passage is one of the most beloved of "new" passages to be found in the Bible. It promises a new heaven and a new earth, one without suffering and tears and dying. One where God dwells with his beloved. There are enthusiastic arguments about whether this is speaking of heaven or not. But whatever this means, exactly, it is a rich and encouraging vision.

It has been a tough year for me physically. This year, as never before, I have been reminded that I am not as young as I used to be; that my body is getting older. I played tennis without warming up properly last May and suffered *Planter fasciitis*, a tearing away of the tendon that holds the arch together. I'm still recovering from it. Then I discovered that I had mild high blood pressure, something I have never dealt with before. But the crowning blow came last week.

I had decided that I wanted to get laser surgery to correct my vision. Several friends in the church have done so and raved about their experience. I found out that if you get a group together, you get a discount. So I rallied a couple of friends and we made the date for our surgery early this month. First stop was a pre-op examination. Piece of cake, right? Except that when I stuck my eyeballs up to that computer, it spit out a message that

said I have *keratonocus*. In English, that means I have saggy corneas. Apparently my corneas have slipped so that I have thicker corneas at the bottom than I do at the top. The optical technician said it was like a volcano and that if they cut into them, they could burst and I would need a corneal transplant. Let me tell you, you don't want to hear the words "volcano," "burst" and "eyeball" in the same sentence when they are talking about YOUR eyeballs. So, I'm out. No laser surgery for me. Imagine my shame. All along, I thought I had nice, perky corneas. But noooo, I have saggy corneas. Of course my friend John Papke who went along with me was told that **his** corneas are thick and firm. Mr. Thicky. I will never hear the end of it.

This is a silly little incident. I'll keep wearing my contacts and be fine. But I was disappointed. I was excited at the prospect of making my old eyes new again. I was excited about never having to wear glasses or contacts again. I was excited about being able to turn over in the middle of the night and see my clock without having to pull the thing over to my nose, about the prospect of waking up in the morning and seeing the trees outside our window. And I was pretty disappointed to discover that, in fact, I don't have what it takes to see everything clearly again. I have saggy corneas. The world will always be blurry to me.

This last century was the bloodiest in the history of the human race. Two world wars in which the dead were counted in the tens of millions, not to mention several other smaller but bloody conflagrations. With all of the great accomplishments of the twentieth century, we have also had more than our share of pain, sickness, death, dying. In our mad pursuit of power and wealth, in our idolatry of science and technology...we have created a world that is out of focus.

Our text this morning gives us a glimpse of a another world. A world that is in focus. A brand new heaven and a brand new earth. The old heaven and earth have passed away. We don't know what this means, exactly. But John takes his best shot at describing what he is seeing. Somehow, God sets everything straight. He returns for a time to the earth and sets up his reign in a New Jerusalem...a new Jerusalem come down out of heaven. And listen to the promise that accompanies this new world: "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has

passed away. I am making everything new! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life."

Where have we heard that phrase before, "water of life?" Do you remember when Jesus was with the woman at the well? That is what he called himself. Jesus said, "If you knew who you were talking to, you would ask ME for a drink and I would give you living water. Everyone who drinks from this well gets thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

We don't know when everything will come into focus. We don't know when God will set up his new heaven and new earth. We don't know how that will be accomplished. But this we do know: If we want to see that new heaven and new earth; if we want to partake of that living water, Jesus is the source. Jesus is the only source. We do not have the resources. As good or spiritual as we might think ourselves to be, we discover, in fact, that we are saggy and weak. We cannot come to God; we cannot see God; we cannot hope to experience this new life that is in focus apart from the life-giving water that comes from the only source of life, Jesus Christ. Is your life in focus? Is your glimpse of a new millennium in focus?

Of all the millennial celebrations you watched yesterday, did you have a favorite? I did. I thought Britain's was the best. It was beautiful, overwhelming, a spectacle. The fireworks were tremendous. The music was glorious. But you know what made it my favorite? They were singing about God. While we were partying in Times Square and in Orlando, dropping 3500 pounds of confetti on the ground, in London they were welcoming in the New Year by singing praises to the Lord. The two voices of those young people were so beautiful, so clear. And each of them repeated the name of the Lord over and over again.

When a nation unashamedly seeks the blessing and guidance of God in such a public way, it bodes well. Regrettably, that is not our instinct as a nation. Our celebrations are secular. Our hope is found in ourselves and our accomplishments rather than the

Lord. Our dreams of a new year and century and millennium are self-generated.

Let's say something different this morning, shall we? Let us declare that we who are washed in the blood of the Lamb know that it is only through our dependence upon him ...our utter trust in his cleansing and sustaining life, that we can ever hope to see the world in focus. Let us who have been washed in the waters of baptism that flow forth from the throne of God, begin the millennium with the words of Jesus upon our lips and the waters of baptism upon our foreheads.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS  
**ALL THINGS NEW**  
*Revelation 21:1-7*

*Pastor Mark Toone*  
*2 January, 2000*

- *Reflect together on your thoughts about living through the turning of a millennium. Did you think much on it? Has it been a powerful experience for you? Why or why not?*
- *Some believe this text refers to a vision of heaven. Why might that be possible? What would make that unlikely? Where does the new Jerusalem come from and to? What is the significance of God setting up his throne on earth?*
- *God promises that he will make all things new. In what way can that work begin even now, before the new Jerusalem is established? Jesus seemed to talk about the Kingdom of God being present at that moment. Is it possible for us, his followers, begin to usher in a new Jerusalem or must we wait until God does the work?*
- *If God were to do one "new thing" in your life, what would it be? Share as honestly as you can. Pray together that God's work of re-creation might begin even now. Pray for your church as we enter into this new millennium, that God's will will be done.*