

“A New Beginning for a New Year”

Ezekiel 11:19, Luke 5:36-39

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The last two weeks, my family and I had a wonderful time in Korea. When my family arrived, my parents were waiting for us at an International terminal arrival gate. When we saw them, we ran and hugged each other. I recall a moment three years ago at the same airport, when my mother was excited to see Jacob and tried to kiss his cheek, Jacob told her NOT to touch his body. Thankfully, this didn't happen this year. Joshua and Jacob also gave their big hugs to their grandparents as they were instructed! While staying at my parents' house, my parents enjoyed their time with their grandsons and even their broken Korean! While traveling in Korea, I had an opportunity to lead a women's ministry group workshop. One of the participants shared that she hasn't heard God's voice in the last two years. She asked me how to listen to God. Definitely, I encouraged her to have patience and keep praying until God speaks to her heart.

How do you listen to God? This question has been lingering in my mind. Last Friday, I shared a message at our LMS preschool chapel. I told the preschoolers that even though we cannot see God, the Bible still describes many ways that we can discover God. One of the children described that God is a strong giant and the biggest man in the world. God also can be a whispering voice. God is still speaking to us in many and different ways. Prayer is one of the great ways to listen to God. Reading and reflecting the Bible can be another way to understand and listen to God's voice through the ancient Israelite's personal and collective life stories. When you seek God, do not only depend on your prayer, listen carefully to God's voice not only through a quiet prayer moment but also through your life, both in difficult times and peaceful periods. God always has a message for you!

Today is the second Sunday of the New Year. As we begin a new year's journey, what does God want us to listen to? Let us listen again to today's Scripture reading. The first reading describes God's best wishes for the Israelites through the prophet Ezekiel. God says, "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh." (NRSV) Do we hear what God speaks to us? *Not a stone heart, but a new spirit in us!* God created us in God's image knowing that we are His precious children in an intimate and close relationship. In the first month of the

New Year, find a spiritual check-in moment for your soul whether your spirit is in close touch with God or your heart is hard. God wants His people to cut out their stone heart and to replace it with a red-blooded, firm muscled heart. God promised that He will give the Israelites a new heart and a new spirit if they throw out all the rotten images and obscene idols. (The Message, Ezekiel 11:19)

The second Scripture reading shows us God's clear voice. Jesus illustrates a parable. It reads, "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled and destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. (Luke 5: 37-38, NRSV) In ancient times, people used a goat skin to carry water or wine with the edges sewn to make it watertight. For example, because wine ferments and expands if it is kept in an old goat skin, it would stretch the old wineskin and it may burst. Certainly a brand new wineskin would be more flexible to stretch further than the old one.¹ Jesus challenged the Pharisees and Israel religious leaders that to put new wine into an old wineskin is not a great idea for it won't fit to make it watertight! What does Jesus challenge us to catch from this story?

New wine for New wineskins, New Hope for the New Year! When the Israel religious leaders claim their authority with their old rules and tradition, Jesus identified them as old wineskins. Jesus now asks us to find a new wineskin for new wine and new hope for the New year! Look back on 2017, there were many incidents, events and changes that have affected your life. Some were joyful and exciting to lift you up and others were challenging and devastating to you. But now 2017 is gone like an old wineskin. Do not let the old one continue to hold you for a new year! Let go of the old year and receive a new year with a fresh heart. As Jesus says, to patch old garments with new patches will not work. You need a complete new one. How can you throw out your old one and replace it with a new one? How will you change your old mind and attitude that you need a new heart and a new spirit in you? You need Jesus and He will help you make a fresh start with a new mind! Accept Jesus Christ as your new heart and spirit! Invite him to dwell in you and remove the heart of stone and give you a new spiritual heart!

As we live out our lives, we are to face many changes and sometimes are to adapt ourselves to a new reality. What is the hardest to do? One of the challenges is to let go of the old, leaving the past behind you. And focus on here and now and live in the present. Jesus Christ calls us to be present and guides us to live in the present with a new heart!

¹ <https://www.ibelieve.com/blogs/christina-fox/when-we-try-to-put-new-wine-into-old-wine-skins.html> Accessed Jan.13.2018

When I returned home from our trip to Korea, I had mixed feelings. When I entered Korea, I went there not as a Korean any more, but an American as a foreigner. Everything that I experienced was not the same nor familiar. I am not what I was. I should be someone that I am. Jesus calls us to move on forward with a new mind, new heart and new spirit!

Most of all, recognize God's voice in your life and find it as new motivation to move forward! As we begin a new chapter of the new year, Jesus offers himself as something completely new that we can count on and go forward. Find your new hope for the New year in Jesus Christ! Amen.