"A *NEW* GOD FOR THE *NEW* YEAR?"

LECTION: Portions of Hebrews 12-13 The New Year's Sunday Sermon, 2003

SISTERS & BROTHERS, we all know that Herb Davis can preach, yet not all of you know that his longtime friend, Gabe Fackre, says Herb always preaches the same sermon but makes it seem different each time. Same old sermon--or rather same *new* sermon, ever new sermon. Of course, Gabe meant his comment as a compliment, not an insult. And I hope that after this New Year's Sunday sermon of mine you will say you've heard the same old sermon from *me* before--but new because I have changed and you have changed and the world has changed: the same because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever"--Hebrews 13.8, which is the text of this sermon--in the Contemporary English Version, "Jesus Christ never changes! He is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (For the remainder of the sermon, I'll not give the specific biblical references; I hope you'll look them up, using the printed sermon for personal Bible study after you pick up a copy next Sunday.)

In our Western Christian calendar, today is also Epiphany Sunday--from (Gk.) "phain" (Mt.2.7, Lat."appar"), that trick spotlight-"star" that, to guide the Wise Men ("Magoi," Magi) stopped over the Baby Jesus' stable. What a story! Just think what it says! The "Creator of heaven & earth" is in charge of (& can play tricks with, manipualte to his purposes) both: nature & history are not escapees out from under the awesome & gracious sovereignty of God. And it says something else: Those are "wise" who see, in nature & history, the divine signs, & "follow" them, their feet guided by their eyes of faith. But that's another sermon for any year's first Sunday. By meditation & prayer you might preach it to yourself, I won't--or have I?

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To sum up this sermon so far: every Christian sermon centers in the changeless Jesus Christ, who is God's "Word" to the world, to us. Indeed, "sermon" is a Latin term meaning "word." When Hitler tried to impose on his people & the world another word, Christians countered with the Barmen Declaration (1934), which asserts that Jesus is the "ONE Word, whom we have to serve in life and death." So it isn't a Christian sermon if it doesn't center in Jesus Christ; & to the extent it does so, it is the same as all other Christian sermons. And it isn't a Christian sermon unless the preacher is walking the talk, centering life in the One who at the beginning of this NT book (namely, Hebrews) is called God's "Son, through whom he created the world, who is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." And because preaching is hearing as well as speaking, it isn't completely a Christian sermon unless the hearers are also Christians daily endeavoring to center their lives & longings in Christ.

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Says a great hymn: "Change and decay in all around I see. / O Thou who changeth not, abide with me." He does abide with us to the extent that we will to abide in him. How can we abide in him? By walking with him where he walks, letting him change us into his image--for without this "holiness" (Heb.12.14), "no one will see the Lord." God says (Lev.14+++) "Be holy, for I am holy." Heaven isn't for those who don't like God and aren't like God: heaven is for those who like God, who love God, & are like him as we see him in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, who took the painful consequences in a world that didn't--& doesn't--like God--& through whose cross we are offered the grace of forgiveness & the commission to live the vision of the kingdom that "cannot be shaken" (12.28). This is the kingdom, the rule, the reign, the sovereignty that in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.6.33-34) Jesus tells us to seek (Today's English Version): "Be concerned, above everything else, with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you." That, too, is the kingdom he teaches us to pray for (Mt.6.9-14; L.11.2-4): "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name; thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And this, too, is the kingdom he anticipates in the Gospels' accounts of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, which we are to celebrate this morning.

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Elliott △ Thinksheets

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 $20 per year
e-mail: wandielliott@attbi.com

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Thirty-three years ago, Herman Kahn, founder of the Hudson Institute, hired me to do trends-research projecting the world's religion situation in the year 2025. My pre-vision wasn't 20/20, but I did foresee both what we're now calling globalization (the convergence of world-forces economic/political/cultural) & the countervailing movement I then called retribalization (which now the world is experiencing as religions renewal, ethnic self-affirmation ["group identity"], cultural revivals--& celebrated as "diversity," "multiculturalism," & "tolerance"). While I did anticipate that **secularism** would become more aggressive, I missed what just may turn out to be this century's major tension, viz. the competition & conflict between Islam & Christianity. 9/11 was not the work of a lunatic fringe of Islam: it was classical Islam whose armies overran most of Christendom 13 centuries ago (all the world being "war territory" [*dar es harb*] except areas already under Muslim control [*dar es islam*]). If the Lord don't come & the creek don't rise, somebody will stand in this pulpit a year from now & preach a New Year's sermon with a wisdom unavailable this morning. Sorry I must report my belief that that preacher will report 2003 as worse--in religious strife, political confrontations, and world-economic chaos--than was 2002.

So **what can we Christians do now**, here at the top of 2003?

1 We can sober up about the cost of discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote THE COST AND JOY OF DISCIPLESHIP, knew that joy in the presence & service of Jesus, his Savior & Lord; & as martyred by the Nazis he came to know & pay the supreme cost. Right now, we Christians are experiencing more persecution than at any time in the past 18 centuries. If they came for *us*, here in South Church, would our faith be strong enough to "resist unto death" (which was a looming possibility for those who first heard the sermon we call the Letter to the Hebrews: 12.4)?

Here's a sobering-up exercise for you. While reading thorugh Hebrews at one sitting--perhaps this afternoon--imagine that they're coming for you (a paranoid fantasy made easy by your knowing that persecution was what those first hearers of the sermon were facing). Read slowly, preferably aloud. And as a New Year's resolution, be resolved that in 2003 you will take your faith--the study, practice, living of it--as seriously as our times suggest you should.

2 We can pray for our persecuted fellow-Christians in Nigeria, Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, China, wherever they are; &, when openings occur, provide such relational & material aid to them as we can.

3 We can save ourselves from discouragement & despair. See once again how our lection this morning begins (12.1-3,12): "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross....Consider him who endured such hostility..., so that you may not grow weary or lose heart....lift your drooping hands & strengthen your weak knees." 13.5-6: Knowing that the recording angel checks our checkbook to see where our heart has been, we can say "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."

4 Because our unchanging Jesus Christ is the Lord over time & its tensions; by practicing his presence--alone & with our fellow-believers--we can know the serenity & joy that fit us to fight the good fight of faith & love. Not without work: friendship languishes without attention; Jesus' disciples must talk much, with him & one another, about what is most important in life & in the here-&-now.

5 And we can be missionaries, telling the Story of Jesus right where we are. Talking with Jesus & with one another, we learn the Christian language; & this skill gives us courage to speak for God outside our circles of Christian community. Half of our neighbors--one-half of Americans--have no relationship to a religious congregation. If you invite them to come to worship or some Christian group with you, they will not persecute you unto death; they will just say no, or yes.

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BROTHERS & SISTERS, we don't need a new God for this new year. But the old God, the only God--the same yesterday, today, & forever--needs new people--needs *us* to be new people, & is eager to grace us with the courage & peace & joy we need for renewed discipleship. Seeing a sparrow upsidedown on the road, a horseman asked "What are you doing?" "I've heard the sky will fall today." Laughing, "What do you think *you* can do about it?" It's spindly legs stretched to heaven, the sparrow said "Well, not much, but I'm going to do what I can." Nobody's off the hook; everybody can do something, in their needy world, for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.