

SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”

Here is a list of nineteen inventions that, according to interestingengineering.com, revolutionized history: (1) the wheel; (2) the compass; (3) the waterwheel; (4) the calendar; (5) ancient concrete; (6) the mechanical clock; (7) the printing press; (8) the steam engine; (9) vaccines; (10) the steam-powered train; (11) the electric battery; (12) the computer; (13) the refrigerator; (14) the telegraph; (15) steel; (16) the electric bulb; (17) the airplane; (18) transistors; and (19) ARPANET – now known as the internet. Other lists include inventions such as the nail, the internal combustion engine, the telephone, penicillin, and contraceptives.

So, who says there’s “nothing new under the sun”? Well, in addition to Ecclesiastes 1:9, quite a few writers in history do, including:

- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Roman Emperor from 161-180 A.D. who wrote in his *Meditations*, “Consider for example, and you will find that almost all of the transactions in the time of Vespasian differed little from those of the present day. You there find marrying and giving in marriage, educating, children, sickness, death, war, joyous holidays, traffic, agriculture, flatterers, insolent pride, suspicions, laying of plots, longing for the death of others, newsmongers, lovers, misers, men canvassing for the consulship and for the kingdom – yet all these passed away, and are nowhere.”
- And William Shakespeare, here in a rough paraphrase of his Sonnet 59: “If there is nothing new under the sun, but that which has been before, how are our brains cheated, which, toiling to create something new, mistakenly brings forth something that already exists.”
- Or Christina Rossetti, the 19th century British writer of romantic, devotional, and children’s poems, who wrote “The One Certainty” – “Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith, All things are vanity. The eye and ear cannot be filled with what they see and hear. Like early dew, or like the sudden breath of wind, or like the grass that withereth, Is man, tossed to and fro by hope and fear: So little joy hath he, so little cheer, till all things end in the long dust of death. To-day is still the same as yesterday, To-morrow also even as one of them; And there is nothing new under the sun: Until the ancient race of Time be run, the old thorns shall grow out of the old stem, and morning shall be cold and twilight grey.”

- Why, even at the end of the first century A.D., Peter had to warn faithful Christians against those who doubted the promise of Christ's return. He wrote, "First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'" (2 Peter 3:3-4)

And, finally, there is Phil Connors, the narcissistic TV weatherman who finds himself trapped in an endless cycle of reliving February 2 in the movie *Groundhog Day*. According to a Wikipedia article, "the term *Groundhog Day* became part of the English lexicon, meaning a monotonous, unpleasant, and repetitive situation. The film has been analyzed as a religious allegory by Buddhists, Christians, and Jews."

"There's nothing new under the sun" – that proverb has come to mean that there is nothing truly novel in existence, every new idea has some sort of precedent or echo from the past. According to one source, "To say there is nothing new under the sun does not ignore inventions or advances in technology; rather, these innovations do not amount to any basic change in the world. . . from the larger perspective of life, human nature has remained and always will remain the same."¹

Of course, all of those examples are from **our human** perspective – indeed, even for God's people, life can often feel repetitive, monotonous, routine, and, sometimes, pointless or even hopeless. That's precisely why the prophet Isaiah and John the apostle wrote their inspiring words about "something new under the sun."

- Isaiah 65: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."
- Revelation 21:1, 4: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more . . . Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

The prophet Isaiah wrote in the 6th century B.C. to his fellow Jews who had finally returned to Jerusalem after being in exile in Babylon for fifty years. But they returned to ruin and destruction – the Temple had been razed and burned and the city walls had been toppled. The people of God faced a long and difficult recovery with challenges that threatened every aspect of their life – political, social, religious, and security. As day after day dragged on with economic oppression and uncertainty about their future as God's people, their lives must have felt as if there were nothing new under the sun. In the midst of those trying times, Isaiah proclaimed, "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." (Isaiah 65:18) The prophet's message was no pie-in-the-sky, maybe some day things will be better in some far off, spiritual, ethereal future. But Isaiah did tell the people about having hope in God's future so they could have hope in their present and live in a manner worthy of being called God's people.

About six hundred years later, the apostle John saw God's revelation and heard God's promise and wrote them down: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 21:3) Similar to Isaiah, John wrote a word of hope and encouragement to God's people who were enduring difficult situations, many times because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. But John didn't offer an easy escape from the day-to-day realities of this world. Again, just as Isaiah did, John did tell the people about having hope in God's future so they could have hope in their present and live in a manner worthy of being called God's people. In his marvelous commentary on John's Revelation, Dr. Brian Blount, president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, writes, "God's people can bank on the fact that the newness that has just now been promised in God's name, and indeed in God's own words, will come true. So assured of such a future that they can converse about it in the present tense, peoples will be encouraged either to maintain or to initiate a life of appropriate witnessing, in order that they can participate positively in the future God has promised."²

Another version of "There is nothing new under the sun" might be what French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote in 1849, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." One person has interpreted that to mean that "Turbulent changes do not affect reality on a deeper level other than to cement the status quo. A change of heart must accompany experience before lasting change occurs."³

Which is what the apostle Paul must have had in mind when he wrote, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) From our perspective, life can be just one Groundhog Day after Groundhog Day. But, in Christ, we have a new perspective on what God has done, is doing, and will always keep doing as he creates anew and offers us a hope for the future that will not only sustain us in the present, but encourage us and empower us to live faithfully day in and day out in the present.

In his commentary on Isaiah 65, Paul Hanson connects the hope of God's new thing with our call to be faithful and active right here, right now. He writes, "The vision of the new heaven and the new earth fosters hope even as it elicits incisive growth. It will be a sorry world that takes a vision of God's new heaven and new earth out of its social justice equation. . . It is a sad prospect to think of a world bereft of servants who labor for no other reason than that God has called them to be agents of a love that is intended to restore the dignity and wholeness of every mortal. The community of faith . . . betrays its calling it is yearns for anything less than a human family so intimately connected with its source that when it calls, God answers!"⁴

If you listen carefully to the prophet Isaiah and the seer John, you can catch the strains of the Advent promise, which we will begin to hear in another three weeks. Advent is as much about looking forward to the promised second coming of Jesus Christ as it is about looking back to his long-awaited first coming. In the lead up to the Christmas story, both Jesus's mother, Mary, and John the Baptist's father, Zechariah,

responded to God's promises of their coming sons by bursting into song. They were so assured of God's future that they sang about it in the present tense. Because they believed that God indeed is always creating "something new under the sun," they put their lives in God's hands day-to-day. And we are called to live with that same trust, even when life as Groundhog Day tries to convince us that there is nothing new under the sun.

Hymn #100 in our Glory to God hymnal is called "The Canticle of the Turning" and was written by Rory Cooney. It is based on Mary's Magnificat, her song of praise to God when she finds out she is going to be part of the marvelous "new thing" God is doing through Jesus Christ. Rory Cooney said this about the song he wrote, "The idea, of course, is that we are all walking a particular course dictated by the gods of 'this world,' for Jesus and his countrymen, the god's name was Caesar. Jesus was saying, 'Look, how is that working out for you? Happy? Well, I have good news: a God with another idea, and his name is Abba. Let's "turn around" and walk in another direction.' So the 'revolution' is both interior (a change of heart-self) and corporate and visible (a new way of living together)."⁵

As I read the lyrics of "Canticle of the Turning," listen for echoes of the prophet Isaiah and the seer John, who both proclaim that our God is doing "something new under the sun."

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout
That the God of my heart is great
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
That you bring to the ones who wait*

*You fixed your sight on your servant's plight
And my weakness you did not spurn
So from east to west shall my name be blest
Could the world be about to turn?*

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!*

*Though I am small, my God, my all,
You work great things in me
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past
to the end of the age to be*

*Your very name puts the proud to shame
And to those who would for you yearn
You will show your might, Put the strong to flight*

For the world is about to turn

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower
Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your justice tears
Ev'ry tyrant from his throne*

*The hungry poor shall weep no more
For the food they can never ears
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed
For the world is about to turn*

*Though the nations rage from age to age
We remember who holds us fast
God's mercy must deliver us
From the conqueror's crushing grasp*

*This saving word that out forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound
'Til the spear and rod can be Crushed by God
who is turning the world around*

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!*

Let us pray: Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have adopted us as your children. May all we do here equip us for ministry, build us up as the body of Christ, strengthen our unity in faith, deepen our knowledge of Jesus, our Lord, and help us to grow into maturity as your children, reflecting the full stature of Christ. Send your Holy Spirit upon us this day, and create in us your new heaven and new earth. Speak to us words of comfort and hope, words of challenge and courage. Come: move among us, we pray. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “What does it mean that there is nothing new under the sun?” at www.gotquestions.org.

² Brian K. Blount, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 381.

³ Benet Hanley, “The more things change, the more they stay the same...” - Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr,” April 6, 2021 at www.enigmapeople.com.

⁴Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 246-247.

⁵Rory Cooney, "SongStories 36: Canticle of the Turning (GIA, 1989)," Tuesday, August 19, 2014 at www.rorycooney.blogspot.com.