

“Every Day A New Day”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
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We made it! We made it through the holidays, the shopping, the decorating, the cooking, the gift giving, the family politics, the relentless expressions of joy. We made it to the new year. For some of us, December was a time of friendship and celebration. For others of us, December was a struggle, even a time of grief. I wonder sometimes if we deliberately make ourselves crazy with obligations in December so the calm of January is all the more precious in comparison.

At least half the excitement for the new year must be our relief that December is over. Our lives can get back to normal.

And maybe not just normal, but BETTER than normal, right? The holidays of December highlight a lot of the things we'd like to change or do differently. We didn't eat very healthfully or find time for much exercise. We noticed some awkward relationships with friends or family. We spent more than we should. So January is the time that we raise our expectations and do some thinking and planning for what we want this year to be. Because this year is NEW. Last year is OLD. Last year is GONE.

Perhaps some of us have been looking forward to the new year for some time. I have had some years so difficult, so challenging, that by December, I felt like I was crawling my way toward a finish line on skinned knees and bloodied hands. *If I can just get through this year*, I thought. *If I can just get through this year, next year will be better. Clean, fresh, good.*

A friend told me a few weeks ago that 2009 had been a strange year for her, an uncomfortable year. But she has a good feeling about 2010, she told me. She's due for a good year.

On Facebook, a friend of mine posted "Welcome 2010! Thank God 2009 is gone!"

So here comes January! Even those of us who don't make resolutions still consider the new year a fresh start. A blank slate. 2009 is gone! This is what the new year is about, after all. The sense that everything that was hard about last year is behind us, and what lies ahead is all good, all success, all the way things should be.

It's an interesting idea, but is it true? Is 2009 gone?

In our modern and Western world, we talk and think of time as linear, as if we are aboard a train moving forward on a railroad track. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, and we sit in comfort as we are pulled forward—always forward—moving straight ahead. We don't have to think about moving forward, the train just moves us along. What is behind us will not be seen again, and what is up ahead is full of possibilities. We believe that things will get better. We are hopeful.

This idea that time is like a line—that we are constantly moving forward—stems from the Hebrew and Christian bibles. This is where we get the idea that there is not only a beginning—God created the world in seven days—but more importantly, an END to time. The idea that a messiah will come and that humans will be judged means that there is a finite end to time as we know it. It doesn't matter whether or not you believe there will be an end to all existence. This isn't about our religious

beliefs. But we live in a world shaped and formed by Jewish and Christian thinking, and we are so accustomed to the idea that time is linear, that we don't even question it. All our language about time is built around this image. We say we are moving our clocks forward and back. We say we are looking ahead on our calendars. We say that 2009 is gone. The train we are on has moved us ahead to 2010, and we can't even see 2009 from the windows anymore.

And we're counting the passage of time. On the Christian calendar, this is year 2010, counting years since the birth of Jesus Christ. On the Jewish calendar, this is year 5770, counting years since creation. On the Islamic calendar, this is year 1431, counting years since the prophet Muhammad migrated from the town of Mecca to the town of Medina.

There are other ways of thinking about time.

The Chinese calendar system counts years in cycles of 60 years. We are currently in year 26 of cycle 78, and we will move into year 27 in about 6 weeks. Year 27 of cycle 78. That feels different. Today feels different if we understand ourselves to be part of a cycle. A cycle repeats. A cycle means that we may someday see year 27 again. Or maybe we've already seen year 27.

Hindus also understand time as cyclical, recurring in cycles lasting over four million years. So did the Mayan civilization. You might have heard something about the significance of the year 2012 in the Mayan calendar. Some people think it means the end of the world. But that would be a very linear understanding. In Mayan civilization, time was cyclical, and in their calendar, winter solstice in 2012

is the end of a cycle lasting over 5,000 years. And naturally, with the ending of one cycle, a new one will begin, starting with year zero.

Native American and other indigenous peoples also understand time as cyclical. Time is marked by sunrise and sunset, the cycle of the moons, and the passing of the seasons. An event is said to have happened 10 winters ago.

Likewise, Neopagans do not count years, but instead refer to the Wheel of the Year, during which eight holy days are celebrated, including solstices and equinoxes. It is understood that the cycle of the year repeats and repeats, and at each celebration it is noted that the Wheel has turned again.

How we think about time and its movement is more than just wordplay. How we think about time and its movement effects how we think about ourselves. It effects how we approach problems. It effects how we approach life.

Cultures and religions that envision time as cyclical don't see life as predictable. They don't expect the same joys and pains to occur over and over again. But it is understood that in each of our lives, there will be times of success, times of trouble, times of peace, times of sorrow. Hard times are seen as natural and expected, not to be pushed aside and forgotten.

And think of some of our common sayings. "You can't go back in time." "You can't undo the past." "What's done is done."

Standing here at the beginning of this new year, it is easy and tempting to imagine that we have a clean slate, a fresh start. It is easy and tempting to hope that the relationships we've neglected, the mistakes we've made, the opportunities

we've let slip by...that these things are all water under the bridge. After all, there's no looking back! 2009 is gone.

It is easy to think this. It's tempting. But I think we've got it wrong, and I think that's good news. It's good news. I think that what's done is not done. I think we can go back.

Don't get me wrong, we can never unmake our mistakes. But we can correct them, or at least try. To me, that's the promise and hope of the new year. Knowing that I've neglected important relationships, I can take my knowledge and understanding of that past and use it to help me do better now. I can apologize to people I've hurt. I can become more active in my community. I can be more careful with money. Not because I'm leaving the past behind, but because I'm bringing the past with me. It's here right now in this room. People we've loved and lost, mistakes we've made, all the pain we'd like to forget. They're not gone. 2009 is not gone. It's right here in the room with us right now. Everything that happened last year and all the years before bring us to this moment, to this place in time. All our history and experience have made us who we are today. We should be proud of our mistakes and our disasters; they make us better people, wiser people. We should hold tender our losses, because if we lost something, it means we were fortunate enough to have something to lose. Love, security, joy. These aren't things to take for granted, and these aren't memories to leave behind. Bring them with you into this new year.

I wonder if you remember where you were a year ago today, the first Sunday in January 2009. Perhaps you were here, at church. 2008 had come to a close. What were your hopes for 2009? Can you even remember? And no matter what your expectations or wishes, I'm guessing you couldn't even imagine the things that happened to you in 2009, good or bad. You are a different person now than you were a year ago. And whatever your hopes and intentions for the year ahead, there is no knowing what will happen, or how it will shape you, how it will change you. The chances are good that a year from now you will once again be relieved that December has passed and that it is, at last, a new year. This is part of the cycle of our lives.

The train we are on is not moving in a straight line. It is traveling in an enormous circle, and we get to look out the window and see the landscape changing over time. We witness the trees as they go from bare to blossom to brown to bare again. We grow wiser with each lap we take. We know what beauty to look for, what dangers to watch out for. Our friends journey with us, noticing different things out the window. Sometimes there is a delightful surprise along the way. Sometimes there is grief. But always there is comfort in knowing we are coming around again.

We don't have to wait for January to make the changes we want to make. January doesn't mean that the past is gone. January is just a landmark out the window, the particular mountain we see that reminds us, "Oh NOW is the time to plan for the future. NOW is the time to think about change."

So I do invite you to think about the year ahead. Think about your hopes and plans. Make resolutions. Make changes. But do it knowing that the pains and losses of the past are not something you leave behind. Rather, you carry them with you, round and round as you travel through life. It may feel like a lot to carry. There are things to do to make the load lighter. Apologize. Grieve. Ask for forgiveness. Choose to forgive yourself. Share your burdens here, in church community, and ask for support.

Whatever else the future holds, may 2010 bring us all love and laughter, fun and friendship, hope and healing. May it be so.