From Isaiah:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, and the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people that I formed for myself, so that they might declare my praise.”

From Ezekiel:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind;
Should auld acquaintance be forgot and days of auld lang syne?” (olden times)

How many of you sang that on New Year’s Eve? As far as friends are concerned, the words are right—we should not forget the friends of our past and the days of our past. All these have enriched our lives tremendously. But, in terms of the religion of our past, maybe a lot of it we should forget. If I remember mine, so much of it was judgmental, exclusive, prideful and narrow. It was a religion of being right in our Lutheran beliefs, as opposed to what the Methodists believed, or the Baptists, or the Catholics, or even that branch we called the Missouri Synod Lutherans, who wouldn’t even share communion with us. We American Lutherans knew we were right; all the other denominations wrong. That is the kind of religion we need to forget today. Sometimes, Presbyterians had that same exclusive feeling. Maybe even some of us here this morning.

“Give me that old time religion; give me that old time religion;
Give me that old time religion, it’s good enough for me.”

Remember singing that? I’m not sure how much we meant it, but the same principle applies. In the 21st century; in the year 2011, that kind of religion is not going to get it done any more. Not for us; not for anybody.

An amazing thing is happening in the world of faith. It’s just beginning; not all of us are feeling it yet; and it’s not really spread over the world yet. But as Isaiah says: God is doing a new thing in our time. Our old religion was centered on the mind—you know, get our beliefs right; that’s the main thing. But a new kind of faith is beginning to move south from the mind to the heart. And for at least some folks, the words of Ezekiel are beginning to come true: God is replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. We are entering a new age, religiously, and I think, for many of us, it will be a welcome one indeed.
The person who’s documenting this best these days is a guy by the name of Harvey Cox, Hollis Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard. His new book: *The Future of Faith* (1), has lucid chapters about what’s happening in the world of faith today, not only in this country and not only to Christianity, but to all the world’s major religions. We are beginning to enter a new age of religious experience that will be welcome to so many of us who have found the church boring and static, and not all that relevant to our lives today. He calls this new movement the Age of the Spirit, which means that the world is beginning to open its heart to God today instead of just its head. We are really trying to see what it feels like to have this heart of flesh that Ezekiel talks about.

Cox says this new age is more like the first one just after Jesus, which he calls the Age of Faith. Folks in that time were not so much interested in getting their beliefs right as they were in following this teacher Jesus, who not only died for their sins but gave them a way of life what was caring and humane, just and peace-loving, unselfish and humble. That life was so different from what so many had experienced in their old Hebrew faith, and were also experiencing in their life in the Roman Empire. Somehow, this kind of life seemed right, while the others seemed unsatisfying. This new faith of Jesus seemed to satisfy their hearts, to bring them closer to God. Then, as well as now, just about every human being wanted to feel closer to God. And this new faith in Jesus helped them do it, even if they were often persecuted for it.

In the fourth century, the great Christian scholar and saint, Augustine, wrote in his *Confessions* (2): “…thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it rests in thee.” Just about every person in the world feels this—maybe deeply hidden but still there. So, today, we have many kinds of world religions trying to stratify this longing for God that all humans feel. You and I feel it, even if we aren’t aware of it. If we haven’t acknowledged it lately, maybe it’s faded. But it’s still there and, deep inside, we all want to get back to it. The trouble is: sometimes we feel the church doesn’t help us very much to do that, because so much of our church life is spent in committee meetings, or activities, or what seems to some like busy work.

So, we have this phenomenon today where all the mainline church bodies are losing members by the thousands because the church doesn’t seem to be, at least for them, what it ought to be—a place that seems to fill up the heart as well as the mind. For so many, especially younger people, Sunday morning is now a time to sleep late, go out to brunch with the family, run a marathon or take part in a triathlon, take the kids to a soccer games, read the Sunday papers, and maybe watch a ball game on TV Sunday afternoon. Or, if you are a single parent who also works (and almost do), then Sunday is time to catch up with laundry, grocery shopping, kids lessons, clean house, and a do hundred other things, that if you don’t do them, no one else will. And who has time for church and Sunday School? Yet, somehow, we must work it in.

Now, let me put in a caveat here. We Presbyterians are never going to be a people who neglect our basic beliefs or not work to get them right. We are always going to have one foot in the Age of Belief, which Cox says we are just now leaving after 1800 years or so. So, whatever this new age is like that we are moving into, we are not going to forget that we are still a confessional church. We have a big Book of Confessions, starting with the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed, down to our latest version of the Brief Statement of Faith, with a lot more statements of belief and confessions in-between. These are our historical treasures and we are not going to neglect them. Beliefs can help lead us to faith although the words are not the same, as Robert Bellah points out. (3) You can’t translate “belief” with the word “faith.” They are two different things.
Here at DCPC, Doug Oldenburg has just finished four sessions with the Covenant Class on the Declaration of Faith, a document not even in our Book of Confessions, but a wonderful statement of our contemporary faith carried over from the old Southern Presbyterian Church.

Again this Spring, as he did in the Fall, Doug Ottati, Distinguished Professor of Theology here at Davidson College, will be leading a group called “Theology on Tap.” The group has been examining small parts of scripture or issues, in order to dig deeper into their theological meaning. His little book: *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species* (4), is great reading for everyone, not just for liberals. It’s the kind of writing where beliefs lead us to faith. And there is a lot more going on—Bible studies, circle studies, new Sunday School Classes, Will Terry’s new class for men, a group to study Science and Religion, etc. We will continue to be concerned about what we believe.

But, as we look to the New Year, and really the years ahead, we will need to be doing more to create this heart of flesh that Ezekiel talks about. All the signs today point out a repeat of what Isaiah said of God in olden times: “I am about to do a new thing; behold, do you not see it.”

Now, very briefly, how might we go about developing this heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone. What can we do to help renew our faith?

There’s nothing original, here; you’ve heard all this before. Our problem is, we don’t do it. We get too busy or too distracted., to begin to build this heart of flesh. But if we try, at least try some of these things, maybe our hearts will become, in the words of John Wesley, “strangely warmed.”

First, study in Bible; privately or in class. If you don’t know where to start, read the book of Luke, slowly, carefully, and then part two of Luke’s story: the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. We can’t read all this without being moved, realizing how much we owe these early Christians who followed Jesus and kept, and spread, the faith.

Second, study one of Paul’s letters. I’d suggest Philippians, because it’s more accessible than some. The letter tells you about Paul himself and what he was trying to accomplish with these very human problems he was facing in the life of the early church.

Third, delve into the book of Psalms. So many Psalms are familiar—1, 8, 23, 46, 90, 100, 121, 139, 150. But read them and read others in-between. And then read the psalms in another translation. I like the one by Eugene Peterson, in his book, *The Message* (5). They have given me a new, lucid understanding of these psalms, which makes them seem fresh and relevant.

Fourth, spend some time in meditation each day. Start with 10 minutes but try to get to 20—and during this time, repeat over and over again some familiar word or mantra, so that your mind does not wander back into its worries. You might just say over and over again: “Thank you, God”; or “The Lord is my Shepherd”; or “Help Me, Lord”. Or, use the words of a famous Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox Church: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” When you mind wanders, bring it back. At the end, you’ll feel refreshed and renewed.
An alternative method is to sit still and quiet for 15 or 20 minutes and let yourselves feel close to God. Let God speak to you, instead of you trying to speak to God.

Fifth, pray. God hears all prayers. You don’t have to elaborate; just say what you need, or the name of a person you are praying for. God knows what is best for that person and for you.

Sixth, read. Read Theology read devotional books; read whatever interests you, religiously. Read the words of the saints. A modern saint is Henry Nouwen. His books are so helpful just to read and think about. And, don’t forget the Hymnbook. Read the words and not the music. The words are prayers and devotions all in themselves.

Seventh, serve. Find a place in your time and life where you can serve God in such a way that you feel in your heart that you are helping some person who needs you. You’ll be surprised how much faith grows inside just by these simple acts of serving others.

Finally, don’t neglect the church—the worship, the preaching, and the sacraments (like the Lord’s Supper today), the music of the church, and the fellowship of worshipping with others. Feel the sense that we all belong together in this place we call the body of Christ. There is no such thing as an individual Christian. We are all Christians together.

Some say: “I can be spiritual without being religious.” No, they can’t. No way. To be spiritual is to be a part of body where the Spirit is at work. The Spirit is what makes faith grow; the Spirit warms our hearts; the Spirit gives us a heart of flesh instead of heart of stone. Join this new Age of the Spirit. Of course, the Spirit blows and works where it will, but in the end, it brings us together in fellowship of people like this. Believe in the Spirit; trust the Spirit; watch how your faith will grow!

I hope all this has been helpful. That’s the good news for DCPC this Sunday morning. Amen.

References:
(3) Cox, p. 230