

“Happy New Year!”

By: Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scriptures:

Luke 21:25-28 and 33-36

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth."

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Sermon:

Happy New year!

Okay, I'll try that again.

Happy New Year!

Well, it is, at least according to the church calendar.

The Christian liturgical calendar

begins with the first Sunday of Advent, which is today!

And so, Happy New year!

Historically Mennonites have not followed this calendar except, of course, for the days of Christmas and Easter.

I assume this was because it felt a little too Catholic or Lutheran for our early Anabaptist fore-parents who were persecuted by both of those groups.

Observing seasons such as Advent, or Lent, or Epiphany is a fairly recent adaptation in the last 50 years, for some (and certainly not all) Mennonite churches.

Now, along with the liturgical calendar comes the lectionary which provides related scripture verses for each week as it goes through most of the Bible on a three-year cycle.

This morning we begin Year C.

Like the liturgical calendar, we sometimes use the lectionary here at FCMF and sometimes we go back to our old ways.

But my purpose this morning in bringing this all up is to point out the fact that whether it is Year A, B, or C, the three different Gospel passages selected are each dramatically similar!

Ruin, despair and agony proclaim the coming of Jesus. Each of these three separate readings are all found at the end of their respective Gospel stories and not at the beginning. They are many chapters and long after Jesus' birth.

Jesus, to use our theme statement, has already been found in that tiny barn. It is his return and the rule of God we now long for.

And almost exact like this morning's passage, the other two also include cosmic disturbances in the heavens and catastrophic upheaval down here on earth!

In Year A, Matthew chapter 24, compares the coming of Jesus to the time of Noah and the great flood, where folks, oblivious of their demise, partied until the bitter end when the great flood overwhelmed them unexpectedly.

In year B it is Mark's turn in chapter 13 where he warns us that the sun will go out and that heaven and earth will pass away. But God's people must remain awake to what Mark indicates, contradictorily I might add, will be obvious signs of God's "unexpected" arrival.

Luke, as we read this morning, adds that this unexpected arrival will be like a trap that is actually hidden! With such promising events it is no wonder that *"People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."*

I must admit, I too am getting a little bit uneasy with how this whole new year is getting started.

Now we know that in the ancient world cosmic and capricious forces controlled both cosmos and nature. The best one could hope for was that perhaps if we placated the gods enough in the right ways, we might be able to lessen some of those destructive forces of nature when the gods frowned upon us, or increase hope for nature's bounty when the gods chose to smile upon us.

Humans, for the most part, knew they were not in control and they pretty much accepted it! But through centuries of scientific discovery, thankfully, we no longer have to accept most of their superstitions.

And with the benefits of science we can, in some ways, adjust the consequences, both the good and bad. But we are also still reminded, time and time again, that we are ultimately NOT in control.

Wildfires still rage out of control destroying homes and lives. Each new hurricane season seems to eclipse the one before in terms of damage and lost lives. Immigrant caravans are on the move, while nearly 20,000 minors still languish in prisons in our nation.

We tear gas women and children seeking to escape violence and imprison the young who have committed no crimes. Mass shootings in malls, schools and yes, even churches seem to happen with such frequency that most of us merely shrug our shoulders and quietly move along.

What all three Gospel evangelists seem to agree on is just as true today as it ever was. In order for a new world to be born, the old must pass away! And yet far too many of us are still walking around with hearts that are *"weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life."*

But all three Gospel passages encourage the same response! Each challenges us, in spite of the terror around us, to remain awake, vigilant, alive, alert, and enthusiastic. It's a bit counter-intuitive, don't ya think?

Calamity is coming but we are not to live in fear or denial! We who believe in a loving Creator are called to live differently. There is a source of something far more powerful that is supposed to infuse us to the core and lead us to action. A new world is coming of justice, love and peace, Amen!

As you heard, I shared with the kiddos this morning that the first candle of the Advent season is the Hope candle! And considering all I just said about the lectionary scriptures, that is no doubt this is probably a good thing, and intentional!

Our theme for Advent is, "Find and you will seek." Which for me begs the question, "Which comes first?" Which does come first: Hope or despair? Fear or comfort? And similarly, "Can we have one without the other?"

Despair at all that is going on in our world right now is certainly understandable and can certainly heighten our feelings of fear, anxiety and lead to even more despair.

But can despair ultimately move us to hope as well? Can it be the actual seed of hope sometimes?

Now I get this on high authority, from my wife the doctor, that the only time that we really need an antidote is when we are actually infected with the disease.

And that sometimes, of course, we may need even more of the antidote in order to get the cure.

And yet how truly radical is this ... to turn worry, fear and anxiety into hope!

I don't think that we will ever rid ourselves of all our worry and anxiety. And perhaps there are times when these feelings are actually helpful. But it is when they are out of control that the consequences for ourselves and for others can become serious.

Often we use the phrase, "light-hearted" to mean a state of emotion that isn't very serious - sort of a joke. But Luke warns us that it is the heavy heart, the one weighed down with denial and worry that will unexpectedly get caught in a trap!

So yes, lightening each other's way is certainly serious. As Luke might say, "it's as serious as a heart attack!"

Last week I encouraged you all to consider taking a sabbath from some of the craziness of the Christmas season. There is certainly much about this time of year that can keep us from experiencing hope this season.

So Stop it! Just stop whatever it is
that might be getting in the way.
And I think humility is a great place to start,

How does it go again? “God grant me the serenity to...”
We need to get over it and accept the fact that we
are seldom in control of much that happens in our lives.
This is the beginning of humility.

But a humble person also learns to accept
the help and encouragement of others.

Stopping and taking a sabbath challenges two of the most
diabolical lies of self-importance and self-sufficiency.
Stopping unnecessary busyness to do nothing
is humiliatingly disorienting, but a pretty good place to start.

When we do that we start uncovering
the exact source of what our hope is actually built upon.

So hang on! God, according to Jeremiah,
is sending us a “righteous branch” to hang onto!
A branch strong and solid enough to support even the heaviest of hearts.

And so I’ll say it again, “Happy New Year!”
And what better way to begin a new year
than with a renewed and reinvigorated hope!
No less than a new world is being born!

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