

“ALL THINGS NEW: I - A NEW YEAR”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Matthew 25:31-46

There are certain days in life that make you think about time. I had one the other day. It was the day after Christmas. On that day, my oldest sibling, my brother Richard, turned 60. Now, I know that I'm 56, but that doesn't seem to bother me. It's when I think about the fact that I have a brother who's 60, and that in a couple of weeks, my oldest nephew will turn 30 - that's when I realize how quickly time passes!

So on days like those, and on days like today, we tend to ponder time - the time we've had, and the time yet to come. We get pensive and contemplative, we think about what's happened in the past, where we are now, and we wonder what the future will hold. Today's two lessons certainly call us to do all of those things.

The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us about the passage of time through all the seasons of life, but Matthew challenges us - really challenges us - to make decisions about **how** we will spend those seasons, the time that God gives us. He makes it clear that we have choices to make about how we live our lives - will we live them entirely for ourselves, or will we live them in service to others, and committed to Christ?

Today marks the first day of a brand new year - 2012. It's a day filled with endless possibilities. It's a day to start fresh if we want to or need to. It's a day to thank God for not only the gift of a whole new year, but all of the gifts He pours into our lives. It's a great day for us to be gathered together here to worship Him and to look forward to this new year. I'm so glad that January 1st is a Sunday this year. What a great way to walk into 2012 - here, in worship, together!

Now, I don't know if you've made any New Year's resolutions, or not. New Year's resolutions, as you know, get a bad rap. They are poo-pooed because a high percentage of them never become reality - but, I don't know, maybe I'm naive, but I say, go ahead and make them - you might just keep them!

So in that spirit, I want to suggest some things for all of us to remember as we enter a new year, and make, or don't make, New Year's resolutions.

The first thing is that we are children of a God who makes all things new, the God for whom anything is possible, the God who makes a way where we can't see a

way, the God who can transform anything, even us. There is nothing that God cannot do, there is no situation that God cannot fix, there is nothing impossible with God.

So is there something you need to change? Change it, knowing that God is in it with you.

Is there something big you need to tackle? Tackle it, knowing that God's strength is behind you.

Is there an obstacle that is standing in your way? Move it, go through it, empowered by the God who can move mountains.

We are children of a God who makes all things new, the God for whom anything is possible, the God who makes a way where we can't see it. What do you want to do this year, what do you want to change, what do you need to tackle? Know that you can do any of those things, because the God of new beginnings, of transformation, is with you every step of your journey.

Secondly, remember that that very same God gives us freedom to make choices. We are not puppets at the end of strings that God controls. No, God loves us so much that He gives us freedom to make choices, and as we stand on the first step of a whole new year, a year's-full of choices stand before us.

Clearly, we know the choices God wants us to make. We need only return to the Gospel lesson to see that. God wants us to be loving, and serving, and caring. God wants us to be people who seek justice and righteousness. God wants us to be ethical, and moral, and loving people.

But in the end, the choice is our's - every single day. May we make those choices in 2012 that will please God, and care for others, as well as ourselves.

The third thing I want to lift up to you this morning actually relates to this second thing about choices. The third thing I want to invite us to always remember is how blessed we are - how much God blesses each and everyone of us everyday. We have been given so much - life and health, family and friends, work and play. We got up this morning and came here under our own power. We are sitting with people we love and care about - people who would do anything for us, and people for whom we would do anything. How blessed we are!

Now, remember that when you think about the choices you want to make this year. Make them out of the abundance of your blessings. One woman I read this week talked about seeing a bumper sticker that read, "Don't postpone joy!" I love that. That's a choice we can make, because we are blessed. Don't say, I'll do that

later, or I'll visit that person or place later - don't postpone joy! God is surrounding you with blessings, cherish them, choose to live them - every day of this new year.

You and I have choices to make - we can live in this new year cautiously and pessimistically, bemoaning the fact that the economy is bad, and the election is driving us crazy, and no one can be trusted - **or** we can live in this new year with joy, celebrating the good things, being positive, and remembering how blessed we are.

I want to close by telling you about something really wonderful I read recently. Some of you may have already read it too, so if you have, I apologize ahead of time. It was an article in this month's issue of *Guideposts* written by the popular Christian writer, Debbie Macomber. In it, she tells how every year she picks one word to live by.

One year she picked the word "hunger." Throughout the year, she discovered what that meant - it was sometimes hunger for learning and growing, sometimes it was figuring out her struggle with weight, and sometimes it was about hungering for God.

Another year, she picked the word "trust." It became an important watchword for her that year as she battled with health issues, family issues, and even marriage issues.

One year, it was "brokenness" - in that year, she and her husband separated. A couple of years later, the word was "prayer" - and even though she hadn't necessarily been praying that her marriage be restored, it turns out her husband had, and they were reunited, and are still married today.

Her most recent word was "hope" - which she really needed because she lost both her parents, but also because she had so many hopes for things in the future that she hadn't gotten to.

At the end of her article, Debbie wrote "How to Choose Your Word." She says to keep a journal and then look over it and see what words repeat themselves. That might be a word God is sending to you. Or just listen for a word that God might give you. She also said, "Don't shy away from words that you perceive as asking for trouble. If God is calling you to explore a weighty word like 'loss,' for instance, don't let fear stop you. Blessings will come from trusting Him and letting Him take you on a journey of discovery." (Debbie Macomber, "A Word to Live By," *Guideposts*, January 2012)

It's an interesting idea, isn't it? To have a focus word for your year?

Well, I don't know if you'll do that, or what you will do now as you stand at the start of a new year, but my prayer for you, and for me, is that as we move into 2012, we'll all remember that we are children of a God who makes all things new - so anything is possible, all things are possible, and nothing is impossible with God.

So, my friends, step into 2012 with confidence, and courage, and then choose to live in a way that is pleasing to God, caring for others, and caring for yourself. How blessed we are to have this new day, this new year! Let us enter it with joy, and live every day fully, faithfully and hopefully. May it be so.

Amen.