

“PRESCRIPTION FOR A NEW YEAR”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Colossians 3:12-17

Matthew 25:31-46

In my office at home, I have six bookcases, big ones, almost floor to ceiling, which are pretty much chocked full of books accumulated over thirty-plus years of ministry. All except for one and a half shelves on one particular bookcase – there you will find a stash of planner calendars dating back to 1985, my first year in ministry. Yes, for some reason, after each year finished, I simply put the calendar on the shelf, and so I now have a record of every day of my ministry sitting on a shelf.

Sometimes I think it’s ridiculous, and I should throw them out. But you’d be amazed how many times I’ll go back to look things up – like a name of someone, or to see how long a particular ministry has been going on. And when I take one down to look over it, invariably it takes longer than I intended, because it turns into a nostalgic trip down memory lane.

Well, in two days, I’ll put another calendar on that bookcase – the calendar for 2018. And I’ll start using a new one, the one for 2019, although truth be told it’s already got a fair number of markings in it for meetings already set and events that will take place in the year ahead.

There’s something about turning the page onto a new year that is special for all of us. We celebrate the turning with parties, gatherings with crowds in places like Times Square, tooting horns, shooting off fireworks, singing “Auld Lang Syne.” It’s a special time, a time when I think all of us are a little optimistic, seeing possibilities that lie ahead as the calendar changes.

Truth be told, it’s just one day into another, but in our minds it’s a bigger leap, a leap into something new – a new day, a fresh start, possibilities for new beginnings and change. I suspect that some of you have some New Year’s traditions – like eating certain foods, or doing certain rituals.

One preacher talks about how on New Year’s Day every year her father would bundle up against the cold and head out into their back yard and prune their grape vines. It was somewhat of a symbolic thing. He told his family it would help clear his head, and give him time to think about the year past and the year ahead – and what he needed to prune away in his life in order to grow in the year ahead. Pretty interesting thing to do, huh? (On-line, Janet Hunt, “A New Year’s Reflection,” *Dancing with the Word*)

Actually, it's not a bad thing to do at this time of year – taking stock of your life. How was your life in 2018? What did you accomplish? Or fail to accomplish? Did you grow closer to the people you love? Did you grow closer to Christ?

And if you really want to see how well you did in that category, you would need only to read over the Gospel lesson again and see where you fall. Did you do anything to care for the hungry or thirsty, the naked, those who were sick or imprisoned?

Or how about the Epistle lesson? Did your life in 2018 resemble those characteristics and traits laid out in Colossians? Was your life marked by compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, love and peace? It's a tall order to be sure, and none of us would be able to answer "yes" to all of those things, but all of us are meant to strive for them.

The Good News is that we have a fresh new year ahead of us in which to try again, to try to be the kind of people God created us to be and live as God wants us to live. And maybe the better news this morning is for us to remember that we are children of the God of fresh starts and new beginnings!

Search the scriptures and from beginning to end, you'll see God giving people the opportunity for a fresh start. Way back in the beginning, though God called Adam and Eve into account for their wrongdoing and even punished them, still he walked with them into a new future.

Think about the fresh starts he gave to King David, over and over again. When David could have given up on himself due to his sins and shortcomings, God stayed with him and helped him be Israel's greatest king.

Or how about Mary Magdalene, burdened in her early life fighting with demons, burdened later on by her lifestyle – but the God of new beginnings stayed with her and helped life change for her, to the point that she became a partner with Christ in his ministry, and the first person to proclaim his resurrection on Easter morning.

Keep flipping the pages of scripture and you'll meet Paul – perhaps the greatest example of a changed life in the whole Bible. He turned from being a great persecutor of Christians to the greatest evangelist Christianity has ever known. Only a God of new beginnings could make that happen.

And Peter. Peter – Jesus' second in command, if you will. A man whom Jesus trusted, a man to whom he entrusted leadership, a man who, when Jesus needed him the most, he betrayed. Yet, Jesus himself turned the pages on Peter's future by forgiving him, and helping him forgive himself – a new beginning

That's the God we follow, friends. A God of new beginnings and new possibilities. That's the God who stands with us now as we stand at the door to a new year, as we look honestly at our lives in 2018 and think on how we want to live and who we want to be in 2019.

You know, too often we approach a new year with more than a little bit of cynicism. Truth be told, we wonder if the new year will be much different than the year that is passing. And with all the talk of New Year's resolutions, we already think in our hearts that we probably won't keep them for very long. We want to be positive as we start a new year, but we've started so many new years and nothing much seems to change.

I read a story this week about a person that carried that sort of pessimism and uncertainty with him. His story was from a long time ago, from the early part of the nineteenth century. On a dark winter's night, he came to the banks of the mighty Mississippi River for the first time. There was no bridge in sight and ice covered the water as far as the eye could see. He had to get to the other side, but he worried: Could he dare cross over it? Would the ice bear his weight? He had to get to the other side, so finally, after much hesitation, and with fear and trembling, he got down on his hands and knees and cautiously started creeping across the surface of the ice. By doing it this way, he hoped to prevent the ice from cracking beneath him.

He'd gotten about half way across when he heard a racket behind him, and he turned and looked, only to see a man driving a horse-drawn sleigh filled with coal starting to cross the river. And he watched astonished, as he was slowly creeping across that ice on his hands and knees, as the man, his horse and his sleigh-full of coal dashed right past him and out of sight! (On-line, Rev. Kenneth Landall, "A New Road for a New Year")

Oh boy – is that the way you and I want to enter a New Year? Slowly creeping cautiously into it, afraid of what it might bring? Or can we instead be like that man driving his sleigh – confident in the way ahead? Oh, I hope we can be like him, trusting God for the journey.

You know, God works in mysterious ways, and I'm always amazed at the ways God finds to speak to me as I prepare sermons. This week, it happened when I picked up a magazine, just to read, mind you, not looking for sermon material. It's a magazine called "Magnolia Journal" that HGTV personalities Joanna and Chip Gaines write and publish. I like to look at it, not that I'm necessarily going to do any of the great things they do with their houses, but because it makes me feel good. Well, this last issue was entitled "The Thrill of Hope," and in it, Chip Gaines wrote an essay of the same name.

And in that essay, he talked about a family tradition started with his parents when he was a child. Before Christmas, when all children love to get a look at presents under the tree, give them a shake, and try to figure out what they'd be getting – around that time every year, Chip's father would take a big long piece of butcher paper and cover the door frame to the family room, where the Christmas tree and presents were located. Then on that paper, he would use markers to fashion a design or picture, like a holiday scene or stockings hanging up by the fireplace. Once that paper was up, no one could enter the family room until Christmas morning.

Well, Chip says, "This always sent my sister and me in a tailspin, dreaming up all that could possibly be waiting for us on the other side. Since we couldn't measure our gifts by the size of the box or by shaking them to glean what was inside, we used our imagination. And the more we imagined, the more impressive these potential presents became. In no time at all, a wooden toy became a shiny new bike. And then the bike became a moped. The moped, a cherry apple red Honda Spree. The sky was the limit – it truly felt like we couldn't dream big enough."

He said, when Christmas morning arrived, his father would go ahead of them, make a big speech like a coach would to his team and then, bam! He and his sister would tear through the butcher paper to get to their presents.

The interesting thing is that Chip says he couldn't really tell you anything about those presents over the years. "Cause the thing is," he wrote, "it genuinely wasn't about the gifts. There was this feeling of hopeful expectation that stirred within me those few days leading up to Christmas morning that was unlike anything I'd felt before. That's the thing about hope. My hope was found simply in the ability to dream."

He and Joanna now do the same thing with their five children at Christmas. They put up that big old piece of paper, and block off the Christmas tree and presents and let their kids dream. He writes, "When my kids see me pulling out the paper a few days before Christmas, hope awakens in them. The excitement, awe, and wonder that runs through them during this period of waiting – is the real thrill. Obviously, I know what's on the other side of the curtain. And it's nothing any of us hasn't seen before. But to me, what's actually valuable is cultivating the *not knowing*, allowing our thoughts to wander toward the *what ifs*. Those musings are what lead us to a place of hope and expectation for what might lie ahead." (Magnolia Journal, Issue No. 9, Winter 2018, "Unwrapping Hope," p. 107)

Oh friends, I wonder what would happen if we were to picture the new year ahead, 2019, with a big old piece of butcher paper across it. We don't know what lies ahead, but we can imagine, and we can hope, can't we? Because we are children of the God through whom all things are possible, and who walks with us every step of our journeys.

Wouldn't it be great to walk into 2019 pondering the wonderful *what ifs* that God might do, instead of thinking "here we go again, another year, another time to break our New Year's resolutions?" Can't we choose to walk into 2019 excitedly anticipating the things God will do, instead of crawling cautiously into it on our hands and knees like that man on the Mississippi River did so long ago?

I close with some words from the pastor who told that story, a man named Kenneth Landall. He writes: "Each of us has a new road ahead of us in the new year. It's another road, a different road than any we've traveled on before. As we step off down that road, not knowing what we may find, not knowing exactly where we're going, we can be comforted in knowing that, for sure, God's light goes with us, leading us, guiding us, showing us the way. God will be with us on our journeys down that new road ahead. Even now God is calling to each of us, whoever we are, whatever our circumstance, calling us to get up off our hands and knees, to stop creeping, and rise and shine, and continue on the journey, giving God our praise, and sharing the Good News with others along the way." (On-line, Kenneth Landall, "A New Road for a New Year")

Sounds to me like a pretty good prescription for a new year, doesn't it? May we all stand tall and enter 2019 with hope, trusting in the God of new beginnings to walk with us all the way.

I invite you to stand as we pray together the historic Wesley Covenant Prayer, found on page 607 in your hymnal. It will be our way of placing our full trust in God today and in the New Year ahead.