

January 7, 2018

"New Beginnings"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Psalm 11; Revelation 21:1-7

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Well, again, I want to wish everyone a happy and, most especially, a very blessed new year. Wow, 2018! I don't know about you, but for some reason now, when New Year's Eve rolls around, I always find myself thinking back on all the talk, excitement and anxiety around the year 2,000, Y2K and the new millennium. It seems like that's become a milestone for me by which I measure the passing of time. Yes, it's been almost two decades ago, but doesn't it seem like it was only yesterday? You remember Y2K, right? And all the media hype, stirring up those fears: that there would be massive blackouts; that computers would malfunction and our entire economy and financial system would collapse; that people should have extra cash on hand and store up supplies of food and water, just in case. We all anxiously awaited midnight. And, of course, nothing happened. So much for the media!

But a lot has happened in the eighteen years since then. So I thought it would be interesting to reminisce together on just some of those events. Obviously there was the September 11, 2001 terrorist's attack on the World Trade Center. That will forever be etched in our memories. But also in 2001, Apple introduced the iPod, which led to the iPhone, and now our phones have effectively become another appendage to our bodies. In 2003 the Gulf War II started, and in many respects is still going on today. That same year, the space shuttle Columbia broke up on reentry to earth. Remember those images? In 2004, a massive tsunami left a quarter of a million people dead in Southeast Asia, and displaced over one million more. Also in 2004, two computer scientists invented the "Google" search engine. Now, it's become a part of our vocabulary. Whenever we have a question, we "Google" it. And, of course, how can we forget, in 2004 the Red Sox finally broke the curse of the Bambino. In 2005, there was Hurricane Katrina and all the devastation that caused. And the Terri Schiavo controversy brought home to all Americans questions about an individual's right to live or die. In 2006 Facebook began, in 2008 the first African American was elected as President of the United States (that definitely was a big deal), and in 2009 Wall Street collapsed. Then in 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by Navy Seals. In 2012, marijuana was legalized in Colorado and Washington, and since then, many more states, including Massachusetts, and we'll see where that leads us as a society. But based on the opioid epidemic, I'm not too optimistic. Also, in 2012, twenty innocent children were gunned down at Sandy Hook elementary school. That should make us question not only our gun laws, but how we should deal with all the violence and killing depicted in the movies and on videogames. In 2013, Uber

and AirB&B started up. In 2014, ISIS began their reign of terror. In 2015 the Supreme Court allowed same-sex marriage. In 2016 Captain Sully did the unthinkable and landed a plane in the Hudson River. And, in 2017, whether you support him or not, this man also did the unthinkable. Donald Trump became the forty-fifth president of the United States.

Phew! Obviously, we've all seen and come through a lot these past eighteen years. I don't know about the rest of you, but I like to think all that's happened has made me "a little bit stronger, a little bit wiser, a little bit more aware." And here, at the beginning of this new year, I think we can be pretty certain that in this ever changing world, there will be many more events and happenings, some of which will take us out of our comfort zone and test us. Fortunately, for us as Christians, there is one constant which grounds us and which keeps us optimistic - focusing on the good, the right, the hopeful, as we look to the future. And that is our faith and trust in Almighty God. For in him, we have a hope that triumphs over the difficulties, the fears, and the sufferings we experience in life. Just imagine how pessimistic things would seem if you didn't have the Lord in your life. Now imagine those who don't. Perhaps that's the reason the world is in the shape it's in. That's why we at John Wesley, have work to do!

Just this week it was brought home to me the hope we have as Christians. Some years ago my husband, John, received a book from a good friend entitled, "Men Worth Knowing" by J. Ellsworth Kalas. It's a collection of short stories about men from the Bible, and John has begun using it again during our morning devotions. The first chapter is about Adam – you remember him from the Garden of Eden, where he was to live with his wife. Well, we're in the middle of our meditations when John suddenly interrupts me and says, "This is really cool. Listen." And he reads me the follow excerpt: "Here is Adam who God has blessed with the Garden of Eden, the absolutely most perfect place to live. But he sins, and, in effect, he receives a death sentence from God and is thrown out. Yet despite the fact that things are going to get worse for Adam, this is what he does. He names his wife, his partner, Eve. Eve, which means 'life giver.' Where did Adam get the optimism to name the woman, Eve. "Life giver." It's because Adam was born in Eden, and he never fully got over it. And you and I are descendants of Adam and Eve, and neither have you and I gotten over it. Fallen as we are, beaten as we have been by natural disasters and evil, surprised as we are by human folly, we are still beneficiaries of a divine plan that begins with (God's) perfection in the Garden of Eden. So optimism comes naturally to us, because our roots are in Eden. We don't live there anymore, but we know the place where we got started. We've lost our way, but we still have an instinct for home."¹

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Men Worth Knowing*

That is cool, don't you agree? That our origin, our heritage, is rooted in God's good and perfect plan. And because of that, we will always have hope for the future. There is something in us that makes us believe that things can and will be better than they are. That we can be better than we are. That we can be more "right" with God, more "right" with others, more "right" with ourselves. Yes, something tells us that we can be more...righteous. Like we heard from the psalmist today, "The Lord is righteous, he loves righteous deeds. And those whose heart is right will see God's face." Doesn't that sound wonderful? But it means we need to constantly assess whether we are living our day to day lives as faithfully and rightly as possible. Are we truly following Jesus Christ, who showed us the perfect example of a life rightly lived? And the only way we can know this is by honestly examining our lives and who we are. And what better time to assess our lives than now, at the beginning of a new year.

So this morning I want us to spend some time in reflection. To examine our priorities, our attitudes, our habits, and be challenged to become better people...better Christians, spouses, parents, friends, workers. And then, to make a promise, a covenant with God for what you will do in the coming year to live more closely as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Eternal God, creator of all that is and was and is to be, at the beginning of this new year, we ask that you would bless us now as we make this a time of renewal and recommitment to living our lives as committed Christians in this world. Lord, we come seeking your forgiveness for our past failings and we ask your guidance for the future and all the promises and possibilities that lie before us. Grant us your wisdom and love as we come with humble hearts into your holy presence. Amen.

Personal Prayers of Confessions

The Apostle John said, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And so, we come now to confess our sins – those thoughts and actions and inactions that are not righteous, not holy. Knowing that nothing, nothing, is hidden from the eyes and mind of Almighty God.

Describe what to do – Now we ask...Have mercy on us, O Lord.

Litany

Most holy and merciful God, we confess to you that we have sinned in our thoughts, words and actions, both by what we have done, and what we have failed to do. And so hear now our prayers...

We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart, mind and strength. And because of that, we have not put you first in our lives.....silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess that we have not loved our neighbors with the same love and concern that we have for ourselves. We have not forgiven others as you have forgiven us. We have been more interested in personal gain, comfort and convenience, than sacrifice and service to those around us, many whom are less fortunate than ourselves...silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our pride, our hypocrisies, our apathy and indifference. We confess our self-indulgent appetites and ways, our love of worldly belongings, and our desire for approval from others....silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our anger and impatience toward others. We confess our quick and often false judgments, our uncharitable thoughts, and our prejudice and contempt toward people of another race, different sexual orientation or economic level. We confess our arrogance toward those who are different from us.....silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our lack of care for our physical bodies. St. Paul said our bodies are “temples of God”, and we confess when we do not care for our body, your temple as we should....silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for the generations, our children and grandchildren, who will come after us...silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We confess that in this past year there have been times when we have been responsible in word and/or deed for causing pain, sorrow or hurt to you, to loved ones and to others. We confess our sincere regrets.....silent prayer

Now we ask...*Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

Restore us, gracious Lord, and let your anger depart from us. By the death and resurrection of your Son, let us accept your forgiveness and turn from the past and ways of old into the newness of life in Christ. That we may find abundant life here on earth and enter into His eternal joy in heaven. Amen.

The Great Thanksgiving

Personal Prayers for Covenant Renewal

We have made our confessions. We have heard God's covenant to us – the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. And now we make our covenant to God. Our promise of faithfulness. Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here." Repentance is more than saying "I'm sorry." It means we change. Jesus asks us to turn from our old ways and reorient our lives to the will and way of God. And so let us make our personal prayers of repentance and covenant to stronger discipleship in the coming year.

Let us pray. O Gracious God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we renew our faith in you, and acknowledge you as Lord of our lives. We cannot live as we should on our own. And we cannot achieve eternal salvation on our own. We must rely on your grace and forgiveness and the power of your Holy Spirit. And so we humbly bow before you and make our covenant, our promise, on how we want to live our lives in the year 2018, so we can be better disciples, better followers.

- We commit to praying not only more often, but more deeply, more intentionally, so that we may grow in our relationship with you....silent prayer
- We commit to greater spiritual growth - to reading and studying your Word, through books, devotionals, studies, so that we may learn your ways and love you even more...silent prayer
- We commit to regular attendance at church, setting aside the time, as we set aside time for anyone we love, to give you our praise and worship....silent prayer
- We commit to offer compassion and service to others, to those who are hurting, those in need, knowing that what we do to the least of these we do to you...silent prayer
- Lord, there are ways in which each of us individually and personally wish to commit to being more faithful, more obedient, disciples of Jesus Christ. And so in silence, we make our own promise to you...silent prayer

WESLEY'S COVENANT PRAYER – In unison

O Lord, I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, Exalted for thee or brought low by thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

You have entered into a holy and blessed covenant with God. One in which you will see change in your life, you will feel a deepening presence of God's love and power in your life. Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation." Listen again to today's scripture, "See, God's home is among his people. He will live with them and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. See, I am making all things new."

Holy Communion

"See, I am making all things new." It's a new year – 2018. You are a new creation. You have a new covenant with God. This is a time for new beginnings, new hope, new life, new joy in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May it be a happy and blessed new year for all of us. Amen.